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An Educator's Guide to the Works of James Baldwin

by Ed Pavlić

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Vintage | Deluxe Paperback Edition | 9780593688984 | 224 pages | $17.00

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Vintage | Deluxe Paperback Edition | 9780593688984 | 224 pages | $17.00

JAMES BALDWIN • IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK
INTRODUCTION BY BRIT BENNETT
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JAMES BALDWIN • GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN
INTRODUCTION BY ROXANE GAY

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INTRODUCTION — JAMES BALDWIN (1924–1987)

Because he's one of our most important literary artists, James Baldwin's life and career reward close scrutiny. The closer the attention, the more valuable the reward. Because Baldwin's work developed in connection (and most often in contention) with the historical eras in which it took place, it's helpful to have a sense for the nature of the connections and contentions that Baldwin's life and work bore era by era.

Baldwin's career as a professional writer began with a book review, "Maxim Gorki as Artist," published in an important liberal magazine, *The Nation*, on April 12, 1947. This was the same week that Jackie Robinson made his famous debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers, integrating major league baseball. Baldwin's last major piece, an essay entitled "To Crush the Serpent," appeared in *Playboy* magazine, in June 1987, while the United States was deep in the conservative backlash led by President Ronald Reagan's second term in office. Over four decades, between 1947 and 1987, Baldwin published six novels (*Go Tell It on the Mountain* [1953], *Giovanni's Room* [1956], *Another Country* [1962], *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* [1968], *If Beale Street Could Talk* [1974], and *Just Above My Head* [1979]), two collections of essays (*Notes of a Native Son* [1955] and *Nobody Knows My Name* [1961]), two full length plays (*The Amen Corner* [1954] and *Blues for Mister Charlie* [1964]), four book-length works of nonfiction (*The Fire Next Time* [1963], *No Name in the Street* [1972], *The Devil Finds Work* [1976], and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* [1985]), and a wide array of essays, speeches, and interviews that weren't collected into books during his lifetime. A collection of those occasional pieces, including several of Baldwin's most highly politicized interventions, are available in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (2010). In addition to work in print, beginning in the late-1950s, Baldwin worked as a leading public intellectual, making hundreds of appearances in person, on radio, TV, and as the subject of several documentary films: *Take This Hammer* (1964), *Baldwin's Nigger* (1968), *Meeting the Man* (1970), *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (1973), and *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982).

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW — CHILDHOOD AND EARLY LIFE (1924–1942)

Born in Harlem on August 2, 1924, Baldwin grew up the eldest of nine children in an East Harlem neighborhood known as "The Hollow," located in the 130s and near Fifth Avenue. Moving between apartments as the family grew, and weathering the Great Depression, his father, David Baldwin, was a lay preacher and worked in a ginger ale factory on Long Island. After his father's death in 1943, his mother, Emma Berdis Baldwin, found work as a domestic worker and never remarried. Baldwin attended P.S. 24 on 128th Street and Madison Avenue (a block now known as James Baldwin Place). During Baldwin's last two years of elementary school, Gertrude E. Ayer was principal of P.S. 24, one of the only Black principals outside the South. Ayer was a highly trained and visionary educator whose approach made P.S. 24 an innovative and dynamic school with 1,200 students, almost exclusively from Black American and West Indian families. Noted as a gifted student early on and remembered long after he departed, Baldwin attended Frederick Douglass Junior High School, P.S. 139, located at 140th Street and Sixth Avenue near Harlem's historic Striver's Row neighborhood. At Douglass, teachers—among them noted Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen and Harvard-educated Herman "Bill" Porter—personally enriched Baldwin's education, which included work on *The Douglass Pilot*, the school magazine. Also during these years, Orilla "Bill" Miller, a WPA-funded intern with the school district, became an early intellectual guide and creative mentor to Baldwin, whose skills with language were noted early and understood to follow his mother's exemplary lead. Miller funneled material support to Baldwin's desperately poor family and, in the name of broadened horizons, took him to see films and plays, which his conservative father would have otherwise forbidden.

Upon Cullen's recommendation, Baldwin applied and was accepted to the prestigious DeWitt Clinton High School just off Jerome Avenue, near 205th Street, in the Bedford Park section of The Bronx. Unlike his previous schools, Black students at Clinton, a predominantly Jewish, all-boys school, formed a small group with whom Baldwin didn't closely associate. Instead, his closest friends—among them Sol Stein, Emile Capouya, and Richard Avedon—were Jewish. Each of these men sustained artistic careers (Stein mainly as an editor and publisher, Capouya as writer and editor, and Avedon as a photographer) of their own and enduring friendships—friendships that included important collaborations—with Baldwin. Among Baldwin's teachers at Clinton was Wilmer Stone, a beloved advisor to the students who worked on *The Magpie*, the student magazine, and the radical poet and song writer Abel Meeropol, who had graduated from Clinton in 1921. During Baldwin's years at the school, Meeropol wrote his poem "Bitter Fruit"—a poem his wife, Anne, began to perform. Meant to protest lynching in the South, the song was retitled "Strange Fruit" before Billie Holiday recorded it for Commodore

Records (because Columbia Records refused) and performed it at Café Society in the early 1940s (and wherever she performed until her death in 1959). Meeropol always remembered a story Baldwin wrote for his class where he described the houses in his neighborhood wearing "their winter coats of white." Also, during these years, Capouya introduced Baldwin to the painter Beauford Delaney, who would become his first serious artistic mentor. The two maintained their close connection until Delaney's death in March 1979. Baldwin, in addition, worked for about three years, roughly from age 14 to 17, as a preacher in Black Pentecostal churches in Harlem.

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW – LABORER, WAITER, AND NASCENT WRITER (1942–1948)

After graduating from Clinton (a semester late) in 1942, and with this father's health in steep decline, Baldwin, aided by Emile Capouya, found work in various war-related industrial jobs in New Jersey. Suffering from racist abuse by foreman, coworkers, waitresses, and others, Baldwin was fired repeatedly during the next year and a half. Finally, after escaping a violent confrontation with a waitress, Baldwin moved back to New York, lived in Greenwich Village, and found work at a restaurant called Calypso, at 146 MacDougal Street, run by a Trinidadian immigrant by the name of Connie Williams. Writers, painters, dancers, and other intellectuals and wannabe artists frequented Calypso, giving Baldwin his first adult taste of a creative community. Baldwin moved from apartment to apartment, experimented—in some confusion—with sexuality, and struggled to find time and space to work on his writing. Richard Wright, a Calypso patron then living in Brooklyn, aided Baldwin by recommending him for fellowships that brought increased time to write and exposure. Eventually, Baldwin began to publish mostly short pieces and book reviews, along with an occasional story or essay. These early pieces were all published in liberal magazines looking for fresh ways to imagine creative excellence that was anti-Communist, especially anti-Stalinist. As the Cold War-era coalesced, Baldwin's early writing appeared in magazines such as *The Nation*, the *New Leader*, and *Commentary* with work criticizing the limitations of social realist art that subordinated the complexity of its characters to the overriding need for structural, political change.

As one of the only Black contributors to these magazines, Baldwin also reviewed books addressed to what was then called "the Negro problem," assessing the place of Black people in the United States, and in the West, generally, after WWII. While he placed over a dozen short reviews, a few essays, and a short story, Baldwin failed in attempts to complete a first novel that could live up to the standards to which he'd held others in his reviews. The incessant racial and sexual surveillance of his life in New York permeated Baldwin's being and inhibited his fiction, which he considered his *real* work. Finally, haunted by the suicide of his close friend Eugene Worth and a looming meeting with the draft board, Baldwin (who was stewing over his failed novel, despite having won a Rosenwald Fellowship) made a mad leap and moved to Paris. On November 11, 1948, the week after Harry Truman's election as U.S. president, Baldwin flew to Paris. He meant to succeed as an artist or die trying.

Notable Early Works:

- "The Harlem Ghetto" (*Commentary*, February 1948)
- "Previous Condition" (*Commentary*, October 1948)
- "Journey to Atlanta" (*New Leader*, October 9, 1948)

Examine how:

- In "The Harlem Ghetto," Baldwin analyzes aspects of his Harlem community in dynamic terms, terms which include complex, often paradoxical tensions.
- In "Previous Condition," the story's main character struggles with racism—especially related to apartments—and internalized self-hatred
- In "Journey to Atlanta,"—published in *The New Leader*, which supported Truman, the month before the 1948 U.S. presidential election—Baldwin's perspective paints the Progressive Party, and by extension Henry Wallace, in a particularly negative light.

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW – EARLY PARIS YEARS: "EVERYBODY'S PROTEST NOVEL" (1949–1953)

During his first years in Paris, and while traveling in France, Spain, and Switzerland, Baldwin lived in close cooperative company with white and Black Americans and with expatriates from a range of countries, mostly European. Among his closest friends were Otto Friedrich, an American writer; Mary Painter, an American economist working for the U.S. State Department; and Lucien Happersberger. a teenage artist from Switzerland. Sharing money, typewriters, food, and, at times, clothing, Baldwin subsisted hand-to-mouth and learned to live and trust life in ways he hadn't been able to do in the United States. With this new sense of freedom, however precarious, he developed his ideas and his craft as part of a new literary era.

Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, became a protest sensation and made its author a dissident

celebrity. In 1947, Wright, who'd become a mentor and advisor to Baldwin, moved to Paris. Baldwin followed Wright's move to Paris with every intention to follow his success in becoming a famous Black writer. By then, however, Baldwin knew he couldn't follow Wright's stylistic example as an artist. The era of 1930s proletariat fiction—an era to which *Native Son* could be read as the capstone—was over. Baldwin's success would have to be executed as part of a new historical and literary era. William Phillips, editor of the premier American literary journal of the post-WWII years, *Partisan Review*, said that new art must "reconcile the tradition of modernism with a sense of history, with an awareness of the entire culture, and with a feeling for the bizarre quality of individual lives."

The first piece Baldwin wrote after leaving New York, "Everybody's Protest Novel," forswears the goal of radical change in social and political arenas. Criticizing Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) as falsely celebrated artistic failures, Baldwin argued that the coming revolution will be interior to each person. Instead of changing the world, artists must show people how to learn from the complexity, contradictions, and paradoxes of themselves and their lives. Baldwin wrote that only close attention to the "void,"—a region of self and version of experience unscripted by prevailing psychological ideas and social categories—could reveal "our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us." With ideas related to this core dynamic, Baldwin wrote himself into the vision at *Partisan Review* and other magazines aligned with this new era of literary arts in the 1950s. That spring, in 1949, Baldwin published "Everybody's Protest Novel" in *Zero*, a little magazine edited by his close friend Themistocles Hoetis. William Phillips and Philip Rahv reprinted the essay in *Partisan Review* in June 1949. This essay signals the key feature of Baldwin's early career: delivering a version of radical action reconciled with the most basic building block of Western democracy—the free individual. At a time when countless millions feared that the next important change in human history would be nuclear annihilation, when the idea of mass and/or collective action triggered traumas inflicted by fascism upon Europe, especially among Jews, Baldwin's literary career began by delivering an account of Black experience tuned and tooled to the highlight the pitfalls and potentials of particular persons.

CENTENNIAL EDITION — *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN* (1953)

Sustained by gifts, loans, and small fees paid by Cold War-era magazines such as *The Reporter*, *Partisan Review*, and *Commentary*, Baldwin dodged bouts of illness and depression in Paris and financed trips with intimate friends like Norwegian journalist, Gidske Anderson. Eventually, Baldwin's young companion, Lucien Happersberger, contrived for them to reside in his family's chalet high in the alpine village of Loèche-les-Bains, Switzerland, for the winter of 1952. Thus twice removed—in creative exile from Paris, where Baldwin had been living in existential exile from the United States—he reworked, reimagined, and finished his first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, in the spring of 1952. In 1979, Baldwin remembered that time in the mountains with Lucien where, "after ten years—and a nervous breakdown—I was carried off to Switzerland and I wrote the novel in three months."

Set in Harlem on John Grimes's fourteenth birthday in March 1935, the autobiographical novel enabled Baldwin to reimagine his origins, his own childhood in Harlem, and his family's origins in the South, as well as the lives of his parent's generation in New York. Crucially, Baldwin's fictional account of his family's past, arrivals in New York, and his childhood, avoids flattening the characters into props who are moved about as a justification for overthrowing the existing society. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* largely avoids direct *protest*. Instead, while written with "a sense of history" and the "entire culture," accented in Phillips's description of the post-war literary era, Baldwin's characters' lives turn upon their reaction to "voids" in themselves and in relationships. One by one, two by two, and inside John Grimes most of all, characters are driven into dilemmas that challenge and rupture the moral, social, sexual, and religious categories of their worlds.

Previously unknown alternatives (the "unknown selves . . . which can save" that he wrote about in "Everybody's Protest Novel") appear and characters must either accept or deny them, tell the truth about them or lie. While leaving the social structure unchallenged, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin holds that Black people's lives can go as far as the truth about their relationships will take them, and no further. Apart from John, and his mother, Elizabeth, the major characters in *Mountain* refuse and/or lie about the most vexing, and therefore most important, features of their lives. Characters like Elizabeth and John, who open themselves to experiences that go beyond those accepted by the world around them, will have to struggle. In the end, it's not clear how John will bear what he's learned about the "unknown selves" he carries in the world, but, as Baldwin concludes the novel, John says, "I'm on my way."

Key quotes from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*:

During the 1950s, while Baldwin underscored the centrality of the "free individual" in his essays and wrote John Grimes's story in a way that could be read as the story of "one man," his first novel suggests a very different path of understanding. Early on, while cleaning the family living room, John looks into the mirror.

> He stared at his face as though it were, as indeed it soon appeared to be, the face of a stranger, a stranger who held secrets that John could never know. And, having thought of it as the face of a stranger, he tried to look at it as a stranger might, and tried to discover what other people saw. But he saw only details . . . and he could not tell what he most passionately desired to know. (pp. 20-21)

Here Baldwin suggests that, in fact, the power of individuals to see and discover is quite limited. As he explains in "Everybody's Protest Novel," most people don't see much more than the world has told them to see and, when they do, they normally turn away. Only when their experiences break down and they fall under acute crisis and stress, Baldwin thought, do "unknown selves" present themselves to persons otherwise known as individuals. Apart from moments of acute stress and personal breakdown, key insights most often arise in relationships, an insight he underscores and developed in his subsequent novels.

*

During "The Threshing Floor" section at the close of the novel, John does fall into acute crisis and experiences new and turbulent perceptions of himself and his world. In one stunning passage, Baldwin describes how a "sound" connects many dimensions of John's world that are divided and separated in his everyday experience.

> This sound had filled John's life, so it now seemed, from the moment he had first drawn breath. He had heard it everywhere, in prayer and in daily speech, and wherever the saints were gathered, and in the unbelieving streets. It was in his father's anger, and in his mother's calm insistence, and in the vehement mockery of his aunt; it had rung, so oddly, in Roy's voice this afternoon, and when Elisha played the piano it was there; it was in the beat and jangle of Sister McCandless's tambourine, it was in the very cadence of her testimony, and invested that testimony with a matchless, unimpeachable authority. Yes, he had heard it all his life, but it was only now that his ears were opened to this sound that came from darkness, that could only come from darkness, that yet bore such sure witness to the glory of the light. And now in his moaning, and so far from any help, he heard it in himself—it rose from his bleeding, his cracked-open heart. It was a sound of rage and weeping which filled the grave, rage and weeping from time set free, but bound now in eternity; rage that had no language, weeping with no voice—which yet spoke now, to John's startled soul, of boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience and the longest night; of the deepest water, the strongest chains, the most cruel lash; of humility most wretched, the dungeon most absolute, of love's bed defiled, and birth dishonored, and most bloody, unspeakable, sudden death. (p. 203)

Notable Works:

- "Everybody's Protest Novel" (*Zero*, Spring 1949; *Partisan Review*, June 1949)
- *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Knopf, 1953)
- "A Stranger in the Village" (*Harper's Magazine*, October 1953)

Examine how:

- in "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin carefully avoids calling for social and political revolution and, near the end, describes the "void," where people can change themselves and their lives.
- in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, "voids" appear in contradictions and paradoxes that challenge the main characters' perspectives, desires, and pretensions and map their reactions
- in "Stranger in the Village," written after *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was published, Baldwin wrote that, through times when there "was no reason to suppose that his situation would ever change," the core challenge of Black history was, "in the words of E. Franklin Frazier, to 'find a motive for living under American culture or die.'"

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW — RETURN TO THE UNITED STATES AND PARIS EXILE #2: LIFE ABROAD, QUEER SEXUALITY, & *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* (1954–1957)

Publishing *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) with renowned publisher Alfred A. Knopf established James Baldwin as a major new American writer. The novel didn't make him rich and famous (as he'd dreamed it would), but he'd proven to the world, to himself, and to his family that his talent as an artist was real. He returned to the United States and lived in New York and in artist colonies such as Yaddo in upstate New York and at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, which began to accept Black fellows during the summer after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in May 1954. Baldwin and Pauli Murray were the first Black fellows to reside at

MacDowell. Baldwin's high school friend, Sol Stein, was also a fellow at MacDowell, where he encouraged Baldwin to collect his early essays into a book that he would publish in his imprint with Beacon Press. Reluctant at first, Baldwin agreed, and the two compiled Baldwin's first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, which would be released by Beacon Press early in November 1955. Titled after the last of the essays to be written (first published in *Harper's Magazine* as "Me and My House"), this collection would further establish Baldwin's career as an up-and-coming member of a new generation of writers for the 1950s.

The first thing Baldwin worked on after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*'s release, however, was a play set in a Black church and dealing with subject matter similar to the novel. After two years, he completed *The Amen Corner* in the spring of 1954 and the play was produced by Owen Dodson at Howard University that May. Ultimately, the play would be performed many times over the ensuing decades and was published as a book in 1968.

Over the years, Baldwin had been working, here and there, on a larger novel involving characters complexly and intimately involved with each other. The novel refused to come together while Baldwin struggled to arrange a professional production in the United States or in London for *The Amen Corner*, and he wrote essays in the meantime to support himself. When Baldwin returned to New York City from the MacDowell Colony in early September 1954, an incident focused his attention in a very different direction. Accompanied in the early morning by his friend Themistocles Hoetis after leaving a party at Hoetis's apartment, Baldwin was walking on the Upper East Side. It was hours after midnight on September 3, 1954. Hoetis and Baldwin happened upon a small group of young men, whom Baldwin thought might be students. The men began to talk, somewhat suggestively, perhaps, when police pulled up in what Baldwin termed a "prowl car," and arrested the group for disorderly conduct. Clearly profiled as gay and conspicuous among an interracial group, Baldwin and Hoetis spent the night in jail before being released with no charges. Feeling angered and violated by the police, Baldwin felt he should go to the press. Then he realized that he didn't want publicity that might shed light on his sexuality, especially in New York, with his family so close. This made Baldwin realize that he'd need to create a kind of publicity for himself, that there was no way to hide *and* be famous. And he meant to be famous.

The result was *Giovanni's Room*, a novel through which Baldwin meant to confront and quarrel with issues related to queer sexuality, identify himself as a gay writer in a particularly distanced way, and alleviate the pressure of being "found out," which he realized, after his arrest, he'd been carrying. Baldwin had touched on queer sexuality in earlier work. He signaled, clearly but subtly, John Grimes's queer desire in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. He'd followed "Everybody's Protest Novel" with an essay for *Zero* titled "The Preservation of Innocence," examining queer characters in contemporary and recent fiction; the essay remained otherwise unavailable until 1998. The first thing Baldwin published after his arrest was a review of André Gide's posthumously released memoir, *Madeleine*, titled "Gide as Husband and Homosexual," in *The New Leader* (December 13, 1954). Baldwin sensed that these efforts, though, were insufficient. By March 1955, he was telling his friend Mary Painter that a new novel project had sprung loose from a longer book project and was speeding its way to completion.

His American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, turned down *Giovanni's Room* when the draft arrived. Baldwin's agent, Helen Strauss, with the William Morris Agency, advised him against publishing it. She wanted him to stake his claim to his territory and write another novel set in Harlem. As it happened, a small publisher in London called Michael Joseph, who had published the British edition of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, agreed to publish *Giovanni's Room*. Dial Press in New York accepted the novel soon after Joseph's decision became public. Baldwin sent the final draft of his new novel to the publishers in April 1956 and was soon awarded grants from the Guggenheim, the Ford Foundation, *Partisan Review*, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters in recognition of the importance and promise of his work. By the end of 1956, with a series of essays in leading magazines from *The Nation* to *Harper's Magazine*, a critically successful collection of those essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, and two well-received novels in print, Baldwin had established himself as a leading young voice, and certainly a leading Black voice, in the post-WWII literary era. The terms of that success turned upon two ideas: social change and collective action were too dangerous to contemplate, and real freedom came about when free individuals transformed their interior lives on their own. While these ideas conformed to expectations in the 1950s and paved the way for Baldwin's success, they also led him down a lonely and dangerous road leading to a dead end, which is crucial to understand.

Baldwin's new financial autonomy, predicated on his adherence to the individualistic and apolitical aesthetic of the Cultural Cold War, came at a serious cost. Success in those terms amplified Baldwin's feelings of social estrangement and pointlessness. Looking back on these years in 1961, he wrote, "What point, then, was there in working if the best I could hope for was the Nobel Prize? And *how*, indeed, would I be able to keep on working if I could never be released from the prison of my egocentricity? By what act could I escape this horror? For horror it was, let us make no mistake about that."

Even as he slipped further and further out of touch, and grew more dissatisfied with being touched, Baldwin's essays continued to promote the individualism at the center of the Cultural Cold War. In "Princes and Powers"

(January 1957), an essay covering the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris that was published in the Cold War propaganda outlet *Encounter*, he argued against all calls for social change and revolution while stressing that it was "the lonely activity of the singular intelligence on which the cultural life—the moral life—of the West depends." Cultural health, he held, requires an acceptance that "each man, in awful and brutal isolation, is for himself, to flower or perish." A few months earlier, in *The Nation*, Baldwin criticized the leftist–anarchist French intellectual Daniel Guerin, arguing that realizing the Cold War ideals of "'freedom,' 'justice,' [and] 'democracy' . . . takes enormous and, above all, individual effort." As his essays described the arc of a career that departed more and more dramatically from where his life was pointing him, statements like these propelled Baldwin toward a dangerous estrangement. Baldwin couldn't see this at the time. But his fiction focused on a predicament still blurry in his work as public intellectual. Pushed by minor characters in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin would soon invent Rufus Scott, the doomed central character of his next novel, who, mirroring his creator, was "[e]ntirely alone and dying of it."

Alienated and in misery to the point of attempts at suicide, Baldwin needed to make another leap. By the summer of 1957, he was back in New York and looking for an assignment (which would arrive from *Partisan Review*) that would take him on a tour of the nascent freedom movement taking shape in the South in the wake of the victory in the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956). That six-week tour (September–October 1957) took Baldwin to the South for the first time, acquainted him with the power, value, and necessity of collective action toward social change, and saved his life.

CENTENNIAL EDITION — *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* (1956)

In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin takes up the question of whether the "void" where persons can encounter their "unknown selves" must be solely a matter of facing interior tumult that arises from the contradictions and paradoxes of modern life. Must the "new acts of creation which can save us" be matters of consciousness alone, with each individual responsible for their own? Or, might the void of renewal involve the body as well as the mind, and might it be a relational dynamic as well as an individual one? The seeds for this question are sown in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, but characters avoid them until John's interior journey on "The Threshing Floor" takes over to show how unknown selves arise from the interior of the person. While the embodied and relational (sexual-spiritual) dynamics of personal renewal and change in *Giovanni's Room* amount to a tragic failure, the failures underscore the absolutely crucial social, relational, and embodied sexual elements of personal growth and change.

Set mostly in Paris and with no Black American characters, *Giovanni's Room* explores questions of sexuality, and of "sexual authority," without the complications of color. The narrator and main character, David, is a middle-class white man born in San Francisco and raised in Brooklyn. Early in the novel, Baldwin arranges for David to grow up in such a way as to insulate himself from vexations related to the "void" introduced in "Everybody's Protest Novel" and explored in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Because white Americans are taught that they should be "masters of their destiny," Baldwin surmised that they must contrive to avoid questions which involve mysteries they'd rather not entertain. This effort involves "elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not." (p. 20) So it is that David ventures to Paris, as he says, "to find myself," when it's clear that what he's actually trying to do is bury who he suspects he really is, suspicions keyed by David's erotic attraction to men.

As part of his effort at evasion and illusion, David has proposed marriage to his girlfriend, Hella, who travels to Spain to think over the proposal. Needing to borrow money, which David's father withholds to compel his return, David hangs out with an older queer man named Jacques, through whom he meets an Italian bartender, an immigrant to Paris, Giovanni. In Hella's absence, and while Jacques looks on, David and Giovanni fall abruptly in love in a magical and, given what we know from the novel's outset, ominous scene in Les Halles. Through his connection to Giovanni, who carries a "terror . . . so vast that it had simply become a void," (p. 24) and through the truth in a relationship involving real love, David's evasions and illusions fail. Realizing the depth of commitment and truth real relationships involve, David refuses his love for Giovanni and attempts to resume his plans with Hella. Driven to desperation by David's betrayal, Giovanni reels out of control until he sells himself to his former employer, the despicable Guillaume, whom Giovanni soon murders in a fit of revulsion and rage.

After news of this crime reaches them, David can no longer sustain his lie with Hella and he tells her the truth, whereupon Hella departs back to the United States to find herself a suitable husband. The novel's end leaves David where we found him in the beginning, alone in a house in the south of France on the eve of Giovanni's execution date. Baldwin's tightest and most concise novel, *Giovanni's Room* executes a parable about the pain and fear of true commitment and the hideous

costs which flare into being with our betrayals of real love and the truth about ourselves. Real commitments, Baldwin finds, depend on accepting and sharing unknown selves as they appear. Set amid the beauty and treachery of Paris's queer underworld and among the evasions and illusions of expatriate Americans, the novel has much to teach in reading and rereading its tragically circular narrative.

Key Quotes from *Giovanni's Room*:

An elder French business man who uses his money to manipulate and control young men, Jacques presents an unlikely source of trustworthy advice. Nonetheless, because Jacques doesn't hide what he's about, Baldwin finds him a source of wisdom. Counseling David, who fears his feelings for Giovanni, Jacques delivers the core message about the embodied-relational dynamic of *Giovanni's Room*.

> "Love him," said Jacques, with vehemence, "love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at the best, can it last? since you are both men and still have everywhere to go? Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that, *helas!* in the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they will be dirty—they *will* be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty, you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will *not* be ashamed, if you will only *not* play it safe." He paused, watching me, and then looked down at his cognac. "You play it safe long enough," he said, in a different tone, "and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever—like me." (p. 57)

To be "dirty," as Jacques intends the term to be understood, involves denying the "void" and avoiding "unknown selves." The consequence of being "dirty," as Baldwin intends the term to be understood, is that persons forfeit means to personal renewals "that can save."

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Having been warned by Jacques not to hold back and "play it safe," and driven by his desires, which he fears, David moves in with Giovanni while his fiancé is in Spain. While Giovanni is socially adept and winningly seductive, the chaos of his private living space betrays a profound torment. The disarray of the room announces that if "unknown selves" can save, they can also destroy. David's role is to engage with Giovanni in such a way that they can dispel his terrors. As David measures the depth of commitment involved in relational renewal of that kind, he realizes that it's not a matter of "intelligence," or simple "pleasure" or "ingenuity." Only if he can accept his "unknown selves" can David engage Giovanni's needs.

> But it was not the room's disorder which was frightening, it was the fact that when one began searching for the key to this disorder one realized that . . . it was a matter of punishment and grief . . . I stared at the room with the same, nervous, calculating extension of the intelligence and of all one's forces which occurs when gauging a moral and unavoidable danger . . . Under this [clutter] lay the terrors that encompassed Giovanni's soul. I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room, and give Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's, must first become a part of Giovanni's room . . . I invented in myself a kind of pleasure . . . [but] the pleasure was never real or deep, though Giovanni smiled his humble, grateful smile and told me in as many ways as he could find how wonderful it was to have me there, how I stood, with my love and my ingenuity, between him and the dark. (pp. 87-88)

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Because David can't accept his own "unknown selves," keyed by his erotic desire for men, Giovanni's needs are too deep for him to engage. He tried to run back to Hella, thinking marriage and a conventional life would insulate him from what he fears about himself, and the world. But he's not a good enough liar to succeed. Finally, he admits his fears to Hella who leaves to go back to the United States and search for another husband. At the novel's close, we find David where we saw John Grimes in the opening scenes of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, searching the mirror and failing to find himself. But John searches his face for questions of consciousness; David's dilemmas explicitly involve the body. According to Baldwin, mirrors can't reflect "unknown selves" and so can play no role in "a new act of creation which can save." Only our interiors under a duress few can survive or in searching and truthful relationships can do that work. We end *Giovanni's Room* with David isolated far more profoundly than John Grimes.

> The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation . . . I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed . . . The journey to the grave has already begun, the journey towards corruption is, always, already, half over. Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh. (p. 168)

Baldwin knew that human change must be a matter of

mind *and* body, intellectual *and* sexual, interior and relational. He knew people couldn't learn much about themselves and the world by themselves; and he knew everybody lies. By what means could people break free from the prisons of their egocentricity, and by what means could social life become a deep and truthful encounter? And, beyond that, what could connect these personal dilemmas to a historical and political dynamic capable of real change in the world? Even by the mid-1950s, all of these questions were already dangerous challenges for Baldwin himself and, in different ways, they were on their way to transforming the 1950s into the 1960s.

Notable Works:

- "The Preservation of Innocence" (*Zero*, Summer 1949)
- "Gide as Husband and Homosexual" (*The New Leader*, December 13, 1954), reprinted as "The Male Prison" in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961)
- Paris Letter: "A Question of Identity" (*Partisan Review*, July/August 1954), reprinted in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961)
- "Notes of a Native Son," (*Harper's Magazine*, November 1955)
- *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

Examine how:

- Baldwin's essays "The Preservation of Innocence" and "The Male Prison" forecast issues involving queer sexualities in ways that illuminate passages in *Giovanni's Room*;
- In those essays, Baldwin is careful to *not* restrict the relevance of his insights to queer sexualities, but applies them to American sexuality (and Americans' aversion to sexuality) in general;
- In "A Question of Identity," we find signals of David and Hella's presence in Baldwin's analysis of the community of Americans in Paris in the early 1950s;
- In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin mixes his personal and family life in his social critique, a feature of the "new journalism" made popular in the 1960s;
- In *Giovanni's Room*, scenes, even sentences, exist where Baldwin has set up contradictions and challenges in and between characters through which "unknown selves" might be glimpsed. What are characters' responses to those scenes and sentences?

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW — RETURNS, POLITICS, THE TRANS-ATLANTIC COMMUTER (1957–1962)

When Hella returns to Paris from Spain in *Giovanni's Room*, the unhappily engaged couple try to talk to each other. Of course, David can't say anything about what's really on his mind or in his heart. So, beating around the bush, he manages: "Didn't you like Spain . . . at all?" Hella's response actually reports James Baldwin's situation circa 1956 more closely than anything else he wrote that year: "'Oh. Of course, I liked Spain, why not? It's very beautiful. I just didn't know what I was doing there. And I'm beginning to be tired of being in places for no particular reason.'" (p. 122)

A photo of teenage Dorothy Counts being abused by a white mob while on her way, alone, to integrate Harding High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, prompted Baldwin's resolve to return to the United States (as he'd remember it a decade and a half later in his 1972 book, *No Name in the Street*), where he engaged a very different kind of "particular reason" than his work had dealt with before. Baldwin recalled seeing the photographs of Counts in newspaper kiosks after exiting the hall where he was covering the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne held during the third week in September 1956. But Counts didn't integrate Harding High until the beginning of school in 1957. Mistakenly recalled details aside, two things are true: Baldwin had pursued literary success to the tune of the 1950s liberal literary culture—with its overriding preoccupation with the complex interiors supposedly free individuals—as far as he could; and, in the American South, a new movement was astir in Black communities across the region. Also, despite his criticisms of their merits and prospects in his coverage of the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists for *Encounter* magazine, a propaganda outlet, the anti-colonial movements were shifting geographies as well. Unlike Hella, Baldwin's idea of "particular reason" would involve all of these ideas: the personal interiors of his work from the 1950s, the emerging freedom movement in the American South, and a globalized sense of shifting power dynamics in the world.

CENTENNIAL EDITION — *NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME* (1961)

Baldwin's second collection of essays would be his last book of its kind. Like *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) assembled occasional pieces that Baldwin had written for money, publicity, and, in this case, to write himself into a newly assertive era of political activism, one that bridged the conservative

1950s with what's remembered as the activist 1960s. Like all generalities, historical and otherwise, the banners we fly over those decades mask many complex tangles, mask how historical change never moves in one direction at a time. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin moves many ways at once, twisting himself out of the private, interiorized straitjacket he'd purposefully written himself into in *Notes of a Native Son* while, at other times, reversing course and promoting the liberal ideas he'd found himself trapped in by 1956.

The forth-and-back effect stems in part from the nonchronological order in which editors chose to arrange the material. Which is fine even though reading them in order makes a lot of sense in retrospect. Nonetheless, considered in *any* order, the "story" told in *Nobody Knows My Name* traces the emergence of an artistic sensibility conditioned by the 1950s into an activist one forecasting the 1960s. Baldwin carefully considers and reconsiders how a liberal self, a "free individual," a person constituted largely in privacy, transforms into an engaged subject, a person constituted in contest with history. As relates Baldwin's career, the other story in *Nobody Knows My Name* is how he moved from publishing essays in noncommercial intellectual journals geared to liberal versions of the propaganda purposes in the Cold War (*The New Leader*, *Partisan Review*, *The Reporter*, *Encounter*) to more mainstream and commercial magazines such as *The New York Times Book Review* and *Magazine*, *Harper's Magazine*, and, most importantly for these years, *Esquire*.

First published in *The New York Times Book Review*, the opening essay in *Nobody Knows My Name* discussed the emergence from liberal privacy that keyed the structure of the book and caught the transitional nature of the era. At some point, the liberal subject has to engage the society around them and the history that produced them. In "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," Baldwin discusses the moment when this transition dawns.

> It may be the day on which he passes a café terrace and catches a glimpse of the tense, intelligent and troubled face of Albert Camus. Or it may be the day on which someone asks him to explain Little Rock and he begins to feel that it would be simpler—and, corny as the words may sound, more honorable—to go to Little Rock than sit in Europe, on an American passport, trying to explain it . . . Even the most incorrigible maverick has to be born somewhere . . . On this acceptance, literally, the life of a writer depends. (p. 85)

Read in light of Hella's quip about "particular reason" in *Giovanni's Room*, the above passage identifies the sense of connection Baldwin considered key to a newly engaged idea of who and what a "particular" person is. "Particular reason," then, for Baldwin, marks both particularity (a.k.a. individuality) and reason (means to an examined life) as socially and historically engaged qualities.

Arranged as the pieces in *Nobody Knows My Name* are, Baldwin's emergence begins in France, returns to New York, and then turns to the social turmoil in the South. Baldwin's coverage of the Black writer's conference in Paris, "Princes and Powers," faces backward to his work abroad with the Cold War propaganda machine. The next two pieces, in "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" and "East River, Downtown," return Baldwin home to New York, where he finds "a housing project now standing where the house in which we grew up once stood" (p. 115). Written in the wake of protests in the United Nations over news of Patrice Lumumba's assassination in newly independent Congo and retitled from its first appearance in the March 12, 1961 *New York Times Magazine* as "A Negro Assays the Negro Mood," "East River Downtown" affirms a connection between growing militancy in Black America and the rise of "Africa . . . on the stage of history" (p. 132). From there, just as it happened, we travel to the South on Baldwin's first tour of the region and meet its "improbable aristocrats," Black activists and their allies who will attempt to establish a new standard to which the country can aspire (p. 65). People like Gus Roberts and his family in Charlotte in "A Fly in Buttermilk," and those in "Nobody Knows My Name," where Baldwin considers martyrs like Angelo Herndon, Willie McGee, and Emmett Till and recounts his arrival to Atlanta where he met Martin Luther King, Jr. for the first time. The Southern tour concludes with "Faulkner and Desegregation," Baldwin's 1956 essay about the controversy over Faulkner's resistance to outside pressure on the South to integrate.

Due, one suspects, to their support of openly activist-protest agendas, two of Baldwin's best early pieces about the freedom movement in the South were left out of *Nobody Knows My Name*: his brilliant meditation on King's importance and the movement's place in American life in the late fifties and early sixties, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King" (*Harper's Magazine*, February 1961), and "They Can't Turn Back," a report on student sit-in activists and their advisers from Baldwin's visit to Tallahassee in May 1960, the month after SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) was formed. The first section of *Nobody Knows My Name* concludes by returning to the North with "In Search of a Majority," a sketch of a new American political identity and the "moral vacuum" yawning where capable political leadership should be, was taken from his unpublished speech at Kalamazoo College in February 1960.

Part Two, ". . . With Everything on My Mind," of *Nobody Knows My Name* looks, likewise, forward and backward at once. "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," Baldwin's speech at the third annual *Esquire* magazine symposium, "Writing in America Today," opens the section. During the three-day event, Baldwin appeared with Phillip Roth and John Cheever on Thursday, October 20, 1960, at UC Berkeley, where Cheever spoke with Baldwin and Roth responding. On Friday, at Stanford,

Roth spoke with Baldwin and Cheever responding. And, finally, on Saturday, in the main auditorium at San Francisco State College, it was Baldwin's turn to speak. Clearly thinking about his third novel, *Another Country* (1962), which he was then struggling to complete, Baldwin discussed the dilemma of an American writer whose "material inevitably has to be a handful of incoherent people in an incoherent country." Baldwin argued that a writer must go beyond the sociologists, delve into things "no chart can tell us." When one begins to do this, he finds "that this country is yet to be discovered in any real sense." Baldwin's review of André Gide's private journal of his marriage, *Madeleine*, "The Male Prison"—first published in *The New Leader* on December 1954, titled "Gide as Husband and Homosexual"—follows where Baldwin considers the dangers faced by queer men who, exiled from mainstream life, must resist "falling into an underworld" where they, in effect, forfeit "the possibility of entering into communion with another sex" and thereafter have "no way to escape the prison of . . . masculinity" and "the tyranny of one's own personality." From there, we leap ahead to Baldwin's profile of Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman, "The Northern Protestant"—the first of Baldwin's many pieces in *Esquire* magazine, published in April 1960 as "The Precarious Vogue of Ingmar Bergman"—in whom Baldwin finds an inspiring example of "a kind of confession . . . to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up. All of it, the literal and the fanciful." Turning from his time in Stockholm with Bergman, and from conversations which helped him solve an impasse in his own novel-in-progress, *Another Country*, Baldwin closes *Nobody Knows My Name* with accounts of his relationships to Richard Wright ("Alas, Poor Richard") and Norman Mailer ("The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy").

"Alas, Poor Richard" compiles three pieces: "The Survival of Richard Wright," a review of Wright's collection of stories *Eight Men* was published in the March 16, 1961 issue of *The Reporter*; "Richard Wright," Baldwin's brief memoir of his relationship to Wright, appeared in *Encounter* magazine in April 1961; and a final section, "Alas, Poor Richard," was added for the book's publication in June 1961. Written in the wake of Richard Wright's death on November 29, 1960, Baldwin accounts for his stormy and ultimately failed friendship with the older writer, who'd helped him out when he was just beginning in the mid-1940s. But, after the sympathy and the pathos of remembrance, Baldwin reiterates his criticisms of Wright's work and his life, claiming he "was able, at last, to live in Paris exactly as he would have lived, had he been a white man, here, in America" and "paid the price such an illusion of safety demands." The fact that the first two sections of "Alas, Poor Richard" were published by leading American propaganda outlets compounds the ambiguity of Baldwin's posthumous focus on Wright.

The account of Baldwin's frustrated respect for Norman Mailer, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,"—first published in *Esquire* in May 1961, about a month before *Nobody Knows My Name* was released—is most interesting now for its description of the creative impasse Baldwin found himself in as a result of his success in the liberal literary culture of the 1950s. As trapped in what he calls "the prison of my egocentricity" as he thought André Gide was trapped in the "tyranny of one's own personality" and in the "prison of that masculinity," Baldwin describes his confused incarceration in another kind of underground: the myth of the free individual. As it happened, Baldwin's tour of the South and his deepening engagement with the Black freedom movement led him out of his exile. But, at the time, all his efforts failed. The harder he worked—or flung himself into his social life—the deeper in trouble he became. Somehow, as if taunted by Jacques's warning in *Giovanni's Room*, he was playing it safe.

> **It really does not help to be a strong-willed person or, anyway, I think it is a great error to misunderstand the nature of the will. In the most important areas of anybody's life, the will usually operates as a traitor. My own will was busily pointing out to me the most fantastically unreal alternatives to my pain, all of which I tried, all of which—luckily—failed. When, late in the evening or early in the morning, Norman and Adele returned to their hotel on the Quai Voltaire, I wandered through Paris, the underside of Paris, drinking, screwing, fighting—it's a wonder I wasn't killed. And then it was morning, I would somehow be home—usually, anyway—and the typewriter would be there, staring at me; and the manuscript of the new novel, which it seemed I would never be able to achieve, and from which I clearly was never going to be released, was scattered all over the floor.** (p.226)

How, Baldwin furiously wondered, despite all these antics and escapades, was he still playing it safe? And why did safety feel like a prison? The answer had to do with the need for socially and historically engaged "particularity" and an approach to life (reason) he'd identified at the beginning of *Nobody Knows My Name* in "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American." This is a connection we can see clearly now, or should, but was only a murky gut feeling for Baldwin at the time.

In the end, Baldwin's quarrel with Mailer connected to his path out of the prison of his own egocentricity. Baldwin criticized Mailer's fascination with conventional American "power, how it really works, in detail," which compelled Mailer into tough guy stances, boxing, racial masquerade, and a bid to be mayor of New York (p. 232).

Meanwhile, Baldwin was angling into the freedom movement, in whose Southern venues, as he wrote in *Harper's Magazine* in 1961, he sensed that the "great emotional power and authority of the Negro church . . .

had acquired a new power." In his 1961 profile of Martin Luther King for *Harper's Magazine*, Baldwin found a model for a new conception of the artist and his audience: "once he had accepted the place they had prepared for him, their struggle became absolutely indistinguishable from his own, and took over and controlled his life." Even though he didn't quite know it yet, opening the aperture of his art and the radius of his life to accept and participate in the means and goals of the freedom movement would be key in enabling him to exit the prisons of the Cold War artist and "achieve a power which outlasts kingdoms" (p. 232).

Examine how:

- In reading the occasional pieces in *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin's journeys move, at once, through geography, from France to New York, through the South, back to Michigan and then back to France (Gide), to Sweden (Bergman), and then move back and forth between New York and France with his attention to Richard Wright and Normal Mailer;
- At the same time, Baldwin moves between an art involved with the endless mysteries of personal life and an emerging engagement with movements for social, political, and historical change.

MAJOR TEXT – *ANOTHER COUNTRY* (1962)

In his third novel, Baldwin returns to his search for voids wherein characters could renew their sense of themselves and each other in terms not dictated by the categories of the surrounding world. Concluded in Istanbul in December 1961 about six months after *Nobody Knows My Name* was published to rave reviews, *Another Country* sought to redeem Baldwin's suspicion that voids of discovery could—maybe must—be relational, occurring *between* people and not just within them. Freed from John Grimes's deeply interiorized visions in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and from David's fearful refusals to engage his embodied desires and cease playing it safe in *Giovanni's Room*, characters in *Another Country* encounter unknown selves through a variety of intimate and erotic encounters which traverse gendered, sexual, and racial boundaries. Baldwin, thus, brings the search for embodied discoveries home from its expatriate sojourn (in what Baldwin called "havens") and into confrontation with the pressures and fissures of American social identities.

In addition to intimate and erotic discoveries, Baldwin finds that encounters with unknown selves *could* be possible in literary (Vivaldo's novel), musical (Ida's nascent career as a singer), and cinematic (Eric's screen presence) forms, as well as in virtuosic vernacular performances (such as the "particular" Black couple dancing in Small's Paradise).

In these ways, Baldwin also intervened in the era's argument about high art vs. mass culture and the ambiguities of commercial success. Despite the ways the novel fulfills the promise scripted more than a decade earlier in "Everybody's Protest Novel," and with the novel soaring on the bestseller's lists, along with Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*, for much of 1962, many of Baldwin's former liberal admirers and reviewers were shocked by the explicit sexuality and the language Baldwin laced into the book. Despite being banned in many locales and censored when excerpted in journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Another Country* is an indisputably major work full of hard-won breakthroughs in Baldwin's fiction career, breakthroughs he'd develop further in his following novels.

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW — THE PROPHETIC CELEBRITY: *THE FIRE NEXT TIME* AND THE MOVEMENT YEARS (1963–1969)

Together with the zigzag route traced by the pieces collected in *Nobody Knows My Name*, the breakthroughs of *Another Country* marked a pivotal moment in Baldwin's escape from the individualized and universalized themes of his early career. He was leaving the 1950s behind. Not surprisingly, many liberal reviewers and commentators cried foul—political commentary in art amounted to dangerous demagoguery. But it didn't matter to Baldwin. A few months after *Another Country* was published, and weeks after Baldwin had ridden the novel's popular momentum on his first tour for CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) at universities (Cornell, Brandeis, MIT) in the Northeast, the appearance of "A Letter from a Region in My Mind" in the *New Yorker* (November 17, 1962) lit a fuse for Baldwin's public notoriety and political visibility.

Swapping unfinished assignments he'd promised to Norman Podhoretz at *Commentary* magazine (an essay on the Black Muslim movement in America) and William Shawn (a piece about his travels in Africa, July–September 1962) at *The New Yorker*, Baldwin ended up selling a 20,000-word autobiographical essay, "Down at the Cross," retitled upon publication, to Shawn and left *Commentary* with an unfulfilled promise that turned

into a burned bridge. That really didn't matter, though. By then, Baldwin knew in his bones that his work on behalf of the Cold War liberals led to a dead end anyway. And most of those liberals and their readers were headed rightward, becoming more conservative every day. *The New Yorker* published the essay, sparking an immediate sensation that initiated a period of fame and political prominence that took Baldwin far beyond any success he'd imagined and into far more politicized terrain as well. This new stage turned upon a politically and socially engaged vision of mutuality sharply at odds with the apolitical and individualistic terms of Baldwin's early critical success.

For historical perspective, consider that Baldwin's fee for the essay ($6,500) arrived to his agent on Oct. 22, 1962, the same day President John F. Kennedy addressed the nation announcing the Cuban Missile Crisis. On that day, Baldwin was visiting Brandeis on the CORE tour, where Angela Davis, then a first-year student, remembered going to hear him.

Even before "Down at the Cross" appeared, retitled, in the *New Yorker*, Baldwin's agent, Bob Mills, and publisher, Dial Press, sensed that something major had happened. So they began arrangements to publish the essay in book form as soon as possible, even seeking an early copyright release from *The New Yorker*. The resulting book, *The Fire Next Time*, coupled "Down at the Cross" with a brief piece, "A Letter to My Nephew," that Baldwin contributed—along with Martin Luther King, Lillian Smith, A. Philip Randolph, and others—to *The Progressive* magazine's December 1962 issue, marking the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The slim, 120-page book's impact carried far beyond its smash success and position high on the bestsellers' lists throughout the year.

The Fire Next Time placed Baldwin's voice at the center of a national reckoning with color, culture, and power that would make 1963 a pivotal year in the nation's history, maybe most remembered for chaos in Birmingham that May, the soaring optimism at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August, and the September 15 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. This sense of national crisis culminated in the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963. The momentum of Baldwin's public work—even restricted to 1963 alone, a partial list would include dozens of appearances; multiple profiles in the national press (including the cover of *Time* and a spread in *Life*); two tours (one in the South, one in California) to raise funds for CORE, a documentary film, *Take This Hammer*, shot in San Francisco; a tumultuous meeting with the U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy; his presence at the March on Washington; and his organizing, along with Bayard Rustin, the National Day of Mourning for the Children of Birmingham after the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church—carried him through the rest of the decade and altered, forever, his conception of how artistic and political energies work together.

CENTENNIAL EDITION — *THE FIRE NEXT TIME* (1963)

Following the letter to his nephew James, which opens the work in an intimate, personal tone, Baldwin structured the body of *The Fire Next Time*, titled as it had been intended, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" in three untitled sections: a personalized account of how puberty compelled his religious conversion and how Christianity, in turn, informs the structure of Western, or "white," power; a likewise personalized account of how the Black Muslim movement, the Nation of Islam, opposed Western or "white" power by borrowing and inverting its structure into a parable of Black pride and destiny; and a visionary sermon that reconceives power into a uniquely American force that, in answering the true call of Black American history, turns on "the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars" (p. 55).

The first of three untitled sections in "Down at the Cross" begins with an autobiographical account of Baldwin's entrance into puberty, an "awakening of the senses," and subsequent religious conversion that echoes closely John Grimes's dilemma in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Universalizing, however, in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin drops the queer subtleties of John's attraction to boys and remarks, instead, the disorienting impact, for him, when girls "only slightly older than I was . . . underwent, before my eyes, their incredible metamorphosis" (p.17). The ensuing panic led Baldwin to a religious conversion he hoped would save him from the complex dangers of a searching presence in the world and acceptance of himself, desires and all, in favor of a piety that detached him from both the fullness of his experience and his presence in the world. In return for his voluntary alienation from self and world, the bargain was that the precarity of free thought and real feeling could be replaced by the opportunity "to commune with Jesus, my dearest Friend, who would never fail me and who knew all the secrets of my heart." After an adolescence in the church avoiding (or lying about) the search for "unknown selves" that Baldwin had scripted years ago in "Everybody's Protest Novel," he eventually renounces his faith allowing that even if Jesus *did* know his deepest secrets, "the bargain we struck, actually, down there at the foot of the cross, was that He would never let me find out."

Despite the divisions (such as between spirit and flesh) of Christian ideals and practices, Baldwin found great cultural and ritual power in Black worship services, where a range of "multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible despair of the goodness of the Lord" caused "the church . . . 'to rock.' (p. 27)". Something among Black people had *survived* conversion, so that, in "spite of everything, there was in the life I fled, a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare" and, according to which, "we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love" (pp. 31-32). Referring to this surprising freedom later, in the fall of 1971, Baldwin told Nikki Giovanni, "Baby, what we did with Jesus was not supposed to happen." Even so, despite the power of Black worship rituals, Baldwin advised that church doctrines should be radically changed or abandoned.

Separated from the "ironic tenacity" that laces all Black speech and experience, and through which Black people resist the structure of Western conversion, white people succumb to the divorce from the world, themselves, and each other, and thereby enter a disastrous place where "happy songs are *happy* and sad songs are *sad*," a place where people become disabled by an "inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their lives" (pp. 32-33). So damaged by an unbreachable rift between body and spirit, light and dark, white and Black, good and bad, even happy and sad, "America and all the Western nations will be forced to re-examine themselves and release themselves from many things now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long," Baldwin argues (pp. 33-34). In order to begin this reassessment, Baldwin concludes, in the opening section, a person "must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of him" (p. 35).

In the second section of "Down at the Cross," Baldwin takes up the recent rise of the Nation of Islam, a national Black Muslim movement led by a self-made prophet Elijah Muhammad and was based in Chicago. The anticolonial struggles of the late 1950s, especially in Africa, led to a resurgence of Black nationalist leanings in the United States, a turn of which the Nation of Islam was well positioned to take advantage. Also, a brilliant, charismatic young minister named Malcom X had risen quickly up the ranks in the Nation of Islam during the late 1950s. By 1962, X was increasing the profile of the Nation in Black communities and instilling fear and paranoia in white America. In July 1959, Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax aired a sensationalist documentary, *The Hate That Hate Produced*, that profiled the Nation of Islam. Rebroadcasts of the program introduced the Nation of Islam's version of Black nationalist theology to a national audience. The rise of the Nation of Islam also shadowed national awareness of the Black Christian-led freedom movement in the South. In the eyes of many, the Nation offered a militant, Northern version of the more restrained Southern movement. Baldwin's initial assignment by *Commentary* owed to the Nation's recent visibility, a feature that plays out in the middle section of *The Fire Next Time*.

Baldwin came to the attention of Elijah Muhammad after he appeared with Malcolm X on radio and TV during the spring of 1961. While arguing against elements in the theology of the Nation, Baldwin, Elijah Muhammad felt, was unusual in that he insisted that the message of the Nation couldn't be written off completely. Muhammad invited Baldwin to visit him at his mansion when he was in Chicago. While on tour promoting *Nobody Knows My Name* in Chicago, Baldwin had dinner with Muhammad and several of his followers. The dinner took place on Sunday, July 16, 1961, the day after Baldwin recorded a historic interview with Chicago radio host and writer Studs Terkel. Similarly to the first section, where Baldwin opens with his personal entrance into the Christian faith after introducing the tradition of militant soapbox speakers in Harlem, Baldwin begins section two as he arrives, "half an hour late," for dinner at Elijah Muhammad's mansion.

While he dismissed the technical aspects of Nation of Islam theology, Baldwin took very seriously how the Nation, especially through Malcolm X's statements, had provided, like never before, a language for "the horrors of the American Negro's life" (p. 47). This was a message that, for reasons Baldwin discusses, Black people in large numbers were newly eager to engage. Entering the mansion, though, Baldwin doesn't encounter loud, strident statements. Instead, he was "astounded by the quietness, the ease, the peace, the taste" of Muhammad's residence (p. 43). Baldwin's account of his time with Muhammad and the small group of his followers, and the gently increasing coercion of their conversation, is so finely crafted and subtly calibrated that its crucial message is easy to miss.

In the introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin discussed his expatriation saying that, in Europe, "the question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the answer was to be found in me" (p. 75). At the same time, he knew there was more to it than that, he'd avoided something in "the European haven" (p. 75). By degrees, he realized that "havens are high-priced," and it was time to go home and use "who" he'd found himself to be to combat "what" the world thought he was (p. 75).

Baldwin uses his dinner at Elijah Muhammad's mansion to narrate the insufficiency of the personal approach to his work that he'd achieved in Europe. Arriving to dinner, Baldwin allows: "I was frightened, because . . . I knew the tension between love and power, between pain and rage, and the curious, the grinding way I remained extended between the poles—perpetually attempting to choose the better rather than the worse. But this choice was a choice in terms of a personal, a private better (I was, after all, a writer)" (p. 43). Here, Baldwin avows his affinities with the liberal idea of art and self: both happen in private and are about personal matters. Then, upon entering the mansion owned by a prophet of social transformation, he asks of his approach: "What was its relevance in terms of a social worse?" (p. 43).

What *was* the relevance of all Baldwin's writing, and the self he'd converted into a vehicle for that writing, to people on "the South Side—a million in captivity—stretching as far as the eye could see," when, very likely, "they didn't even read" (p. 43)? As dinner progressed, Muhammad finds his way to asking Baldwin, "What are you now?" Focused on religion, the question resonates beyond religious terms. And Baldwin has no answer: "'I? Now? Nothing.' This was not enough. 'I'm a writer. I like doing things alone.' I heard myself saying this. Elijah smiled at me. 'I don't, anyway,' I said, finally, 'think about it a great deal.'" To this, Muhammad responds: "I think he ought to think about it *all* the deal" (p. 48). Baldwin converts Elijah's religious inquiry into an implausible defeat at debate. Baldwin's reliance on "havens" was dying, he was replacing it with very different kind of work and participation in explicit, even militant, movements for social change. In the scene, he realizes that his "weak, deluded scruples" couldn't answer the need for power to exert social and historical force, and a personal identity and an artistic method could be part of that work. As they stood on Elijah Muhammad's doorstep after dinner on July 16, 1961, Baldwin reports that he "had failed a test, in their eyes and in my own."

The dawning decade of the 1960s would be different from the 1930s in which Baldwin had grown up saying, "'*Yes*, I'm black, goddammit, and I'm beautiful'—in defiance, into the void," and the 1940s and 1950s where he'd searched for a "haven" to vomit up all the codes of white supremacy he'd swallowed (p. 52). There was now, loose in the world, a historical outlet for that need and pride. The power of this era was dangerous in a new way, but it couldn't possibly be avoided. Thinking again of the people on the South Side, on so many south sides, and west sides, he wrote:

> As they watch black men elsewhere rise, the promise held out, at last, that they may walk the earth with the authority with which white men walk, protected by the power that white men shall have no longer, is enough, and more than enough, to empty prisons and pull God down from Heaven. (p. 52)

This was exactly the promise to be embraced, and this was also, exactly and precisely, the danger to be avoided at all costs. Near the close of the section, Baldwin arrives at the key question and the topic of his sermon in part three: "How can one, however, dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power" (p. 54). In the concluding section of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin attempts to do just that.

The Fire Next Time concludes with the third section of "Down at the Cross," Baldwin's social sermon urging readers to cast off their adherence to the systems of division and alienation, the worship of skin color maybe most of all, and to attempt, perhaps for the first time, to cast away their mirrors of private, self-reflection, see themselves in each other, and be seen *by* each other. Echoing John Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and David's failures in *Giovanni's Room* in their private mirrors, and accenting the mutual breakthroughs in *Another Country*, Baldwin invites the reader away from "the tyranny of his mirror" because "mirrors can only lie . . . death by drowning is all that awaits one there" (pp. 62-63). The most important unknown selves can't be discovered in private havens of reflection but by engaging public, historical action. Social visions mustn't be coldly empirical but, rather, passionately alive. We must *encounter* each other with love, which Baldwin invokes "not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth" (p. 63).

Leaving the outside world alone while each individual revolutionizes themselves from the inside had always been a fantasy. This was the liberal structure available to—or forced upon—Baldwin as he made his career, and it compelled him to make crucial first steps. But that was over and a new era was dawning. By the end of 1962, Baldwin was calling it what it was in no uncertain terms. The first step was to take back the question of social transformation, which, during the 1930s and 1940s, had been ceded to the communists and was avoided altogether during the 1950s. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin reasserts the need for change far beyond the personal interiors of supposedly free individuals: "there is simply no possibility of real change in the Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure" (p. 57).

Part of these changes must mean replacing the models of Western—or modern—power, cultural power, as well as political power. And the answer, Baldwin argued, was not placing Black and non-white people into the existing structures, which would only result in more people, Black and otherwise, becoming "dependent on the American psychiatrist" to "support the moral

contradictions and the spiritual aridity" of their lives (p. 63). Baldwin argued instead that Black people, and Black history, might offer "*the* key figure in" American transformation, because, as far as he could see, it was Black families who "have been able to produce children of kindergarten age who can talk through mobs to get to school," whose children "come out of a long line of improbable aristocrats—the only genuine aristocrats this country has produced" (p. 65). Unlike other, would-be historical models for American culture and behavior, *these* aristocrats' "frame of reference was totally American" (p. 65). Black people—as well as others who, in emulating these models, "in effect, become black" (p. 63) themselves—should be proud of this historical legacy and the persons who represent it "not because of their color but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and their beauty" (p. 66).

In this, Baldwin thought, by replacing the murderous concept of "race" with an appreciation for how and why "black" becomes "*the* key" color in a transformed America, we might "avoid the European error" (p. 66) of racial categorization itself. This last point is crucial, Baldwin warns, because classifying—whether in glorification or debasement—people according to racial categories "has always been and will always be a recipe for murder. There is no way around this" (p. 55).

The conclusion to *The Fire Next Time* was reprinted and recited from coast to coast. If it sounds idealized in the twenty-first century, it's not because a plausible alternative has been found. Here are his concluding words:

> **And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands: we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, us upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water the fire next time!*** (pp. 68-69)

The italicized lines Baldwin quoted to conclude can be listed as "traditional" and show up in various songs across history. But they are maybe most powerfully available in a performance by Paul Robeson (prhlink.com/paulrobeson).

Examine how:

- In each section of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin attempts to sustain the personal frame of reference, meanwhile expanding it, until he can arrive at statements far more general, historical, social, and political than a personal point of view can possibly support.
- In section three, the personal scenes give way to his vision for a renewed and transformed social life and American identity, as if he's responding to having been caught, by Elijah Muhammad, or by history, without a vision beyond his personal circumstances "as a writer" who does things "alone."
- This change in his work alarmed his liberal colleagues, editors, and reviewers.

For two important responses to *The Fire Next Time*, see F. W. Dupee's review in the first issue of *The New York Review of Books* bemoaning the change in his voice (prhlink.com/baldwinandtheman) and Hannah Arendt's letter to Baldwin warning against passion in public thinking and action (prhlink.com/arendtlettertobaldwin).

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW — THE MOVEMENT YEARS, BLACK POWER, AND BALDWIN'S RADICALIZATION (1963–1972)

Spun into action by the onrushing momentum of the freedom movement in 1963 and the corresponding surge of his fame after *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin's work between 1963 and 1969 was almost always public facing. Beginning with the assassination of Medgar Evers on June 12, 1963, the violence increased and killings proceeded: the six kids murdered in Birmingham on September 15, 1963; James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in June 1964; Malcolm X on February 12, 1965; and Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 mark only the most high-profile examples. Baldwin's public work included dozens of speaking engagements and interviews in which he tried to focus the meaning of the social tumult and increasing radicalism of the movement for audiences and participants, alike as well as to raise funds to support the action.

His second play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, which he began in the late 1950s as a meditation on the lynching of Emmett Till in August 1955 and finished in the wake of Medgar Evers's assassination, played in Broadway's ANTA Playhouse from April 23–August 29, 1964.

In 1965, Dial Press published *Going to Meet the Man*, a collection of Baldwin's short stories, including "Previous Condition" (1948), the title story "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), and "Sonny's Blues" (1957), one of Baldwin's best pieces of any kind.

Beginning in the summer of 1966, when Stokely Carmichael placed the term "Black Power" in public circulation, Baldwin worked with the new wave of activists. Many of the young activists, who were a generation younger and suspicious of Baldwin's popular reputation, as well as his work with liberal magazines and nonviolent organizations like CORE, were openly critical and publicly hostile to the author.

Soon-to-be Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver wrote "Notes on a Native Son" (*Ramparts*, June 1966) while incarcerated at Soledad State Prison in California. Cleaver argued that "Baldwin, embodying in his art the self-flagellating policy of Martin Luther King," was gripped by a "total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in any black American writer of note in our time." Viewing "homosexuality" as "a sickness, just as much as baby-rape," Cleaver considered Baldwin's image and work to be a dangerous stain on Black pride and Black manhood. Baldwin was hurt by these kinds of comments, but he understood them and, moreover, understood that the younger generation would have to make up their minds about many, many things, including how to further the goals of the freedom movement. He sought out and maintained relationships with the younger generation in order to provide whatever guidance they would accept and learn as much as he could about the future they were trying to create.

Baldwin's other major work during these years was his fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), which echoes Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* in considering the place of artistic craft during an age of revolution. Baldwin wrote the novel during periods, from 1965 to 1968, mostly in Istanbul, where he lived when he left the United States to interrupt the constant movement, tension, and chronic danger of his public work during the 1960s.

In the spring of 1968, Baldwin agreed to adapt Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* into a screenplay for Columbia Pictures. Since his assassination, X had become the key martyr in the eyes of the Black Power generation of activists and revolutionaries. Owing to this work, which ultimately didn't result in a successful film, Baldwin lived in Los Angeles and Palm Springs from March 1968 until July 1969.

While based in California, Istanbul, and France, in private and in public, openly and in secret, Baldwin supported and advised figures such as Stokely Carmichael, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and others as best he could. As he had for the older generation —including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.— Baldwin's work often attempted to translate the logic of Black Power to popular audiences of all kinds.

During the summer of 1969, Baldwin abandoned the routine of moment-to-moment engagement he'd practiced during the 1960s. He left the United States to regain his sense of perspective and reflect upon the preceding years. Living at first in Istanbul, he eventually settled, by the beginning of 1971, in St. Paul de Vence, France, where he'd be based until his death in 1987.

Intended as a bookend to *The Fire Next Time*, *No Name in the Street* (1972) improvises Baldwin's autobiography from a radicalized point of view. Baldwin's radicalism,

likewise improvised, lacks a stable ideological frame. The point of view in *No Name in the Street*, which Baldwin would more or less refine and sustain for the rest of his life, turns on three main features, features that had simmered throughout the first decades of his work, but came into coherent, if ever-shifting, shape during his work with the freedom movement years (1963–1969).

The mobile moorings of Baldwin's radicalism are these: first, human experience takes shape in mutual terms, no longer was the individual interior the basic building block for human reality—human lives and realities, certainly Black ones, were thoroughly relational; second, sexuality was indispensable to all aspects and areas of experience—being within reach, relationally, meant remaining in touch, sensually; third, all life was political, there were no havens where persons, conscious subjects, constituted themselves free of social and historical forces. Through these three conceptions, Baldwin transformed his idea of freedom from the liberal ideal of an individual life insulated from historical force and social pressure to a radical sense that human reality was suffused with historical meaning and social process. In this sense, *No Name in the Street* retells the story of Baldwin's life and career up to about 1970 from a radicalized point of view.

Many of Baldwin's journalistic pieces addressing key issues and figures of Black Power were left out of the collections of his work until *The Cross of Redemption* (2010) made them available to readers. It's great to have pieces like "Black Power," "An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Y. Davis," "Speech from the Soledad Rally," "The International War Crimes Tribunal," and "The Price May Be Too High" collected in readable form. All of these pieces provide valuable accompaniment to *No Name in the Street*.

CENTENNIAL EDITION — *NO NAME IN THE STREET* (1969–1972)

In "Take Me to the Water," the first section of *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin begins with his earliest memories at his mother's side and retells the story of his experience as the eldest child who watches the arrival of his younger brothers and sisters. Where John Grimes is egocentric in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin's radicalized self-portrait comes together in a web of familial solidarity among the children, involving their mother, in league against their domineering father. Addressing the strange streams and skips of memory, Baldwin moves through his childhood, his mad leap to France, and his early years in Paris, in which he emphasizes his connection to the Arab and Algerian communities and the increasing violence these communities faced at the hands of French police through the 1950s as the anticolonial struggles gained force.

In describing his returns to the United States in the early 1950s, after *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had been accepted, Baldwin sketches the mounting anti-communist paranoia of the McCarthy era and his vexed position among the Cold War liberals who were his colleagues during the early years of his career. Baldwin's remembrance of how he slipped into the individualized approach as one of the only Black writers in those magazines, and at their parties, addresses a major feature of his career that is widely misunderstood. Recalling his early career from his radicalized vantage in the early 1970s, he writes:

> **It was a strange kind of discomfort, a terrified apprehension that I had lost my bearings, I did not altogether understand what I was hearing. I did not trust what I heard myself saying. In very little of what I heard did I hear anything that reflected anything which I knew, or had endured, of life. My mother and father, my brothers and sisters were not present at the tables at which I sat down, and no one in the company had ever heard of them . . . if my poverty was coming, at last, to an end, so much the better, and it wasn't happening a moment too soon—and yet, I felt an increasing chill, as though the rest of my life would have to be lived in silence.** (p. 264)

An early scene in "Take Me to the Water" charts the leap in Baldwin's point of view between *The Fire Next Time* and *No Name in the Street*. During the account of his childhood, Baldwin describes his adolescent friendship with Arthur Moore, whose family accompanied him to Mother Horn's church in Harlem, where he experienced the religious conversion fictionalized at the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and revisited early in *The Fire Next Time*. In *No Name in the Street*, he leapfrogs through time to 1968, when, in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, Arthur Moore learns, from a newspaper, that Baldwin will never again be able to wear the suit that he'd had made to appear with King that February at Carnegie Hall. He couldn't wear the suit again because, on April 9, he had worn it to King's funeral in Atlanta. After not having seen each other in decades, Moore calls to ask, since he can't wear it, if Baldwin might give the suit to him. So, carrying the suit, Baldwin, now a celebrity, arrives to Moore's apartment in the Bronx for dinner.

The scene mirrors, almost too precisely, Baldwin's visit to Elijah Muhammad's mansion seven years earlier, except the tables have turned 180 degrees. Now it's Moore whose personal life exists independently of politics and, Baldwin learns, from the lives of his family as well. Baldwin marvels at how Moore has fallen out of touch with the political world *and* his private life. Now it's Baldwin who insists that self, work, and family are all suffused with social and political responsibility. In *The Fire Next Time*, Elijah Muhammad asks Baldwin about his social identity, his identity *in* history, not apart from it: "And what are you now?" Baldwin had no adequate answer at the time. In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin asks the same question of himself and Moore. This time *he* has the answers:

> **I had gone my way and life had accomplished its inexorable mathematic—and what in the world was I by now but an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak? His old friend. And what was he now? He worked for the post office and was building a house next door to his mother, in, I think, Long Island. They, too, then, had made it. But what I could not understand was how nothing seemed to have touched this man.** (p. 255)

Finally, Baldwin erupts over Moore's support of the war in Vietnam, curses his friend, and offends everyone. Having ruined the evening in the name of political identifications his friend and his family avoid, Baldwin mourns the unbridgeable distance and the lack of a way to make real for his friend and his family that "no one is free until all are free . . . and that the price is high" (p. 257). This scene also intimates that, possibly, remaining in touch privately depends upon extending one's reach politically, and vice versa.

The final section of "Take Me to the Water" recollects Baldwin's early tours of the South during the freedom movement years, roughly 1957 to 1960. Again, blurring and skipping across time and between locations from Charlotte, to Atlanta, to Montgomery, Baldwin recounts the experiences that had drawn him out of the individualized estrangement he'd undergone while working on behalf of the liberal magazines and brought

him back into touch with himself, and with the history that had shaped him. Recalling some—such as Martin Luther King, Jr. in Atlanta and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham—by name, and leaving others anonymous or referring to them—as he does with Revs. C.K. Steele and Daniel Speed in Tallahassee—by their initials, Baldwin, a visitor if not a foreigner in the South, nonetheless reports: "I felt very much at home among the dark people who lived where I, if so much had not been disrupted, would logically have been born" (p. 289). In a way he hadn't seen coming, and in ways that still confuse many of his readers who think of him as a New Yorker who enjoyed fancy places like Paris—the way he tells it in *No Name in the Street*—it was Baldwin's tours of the American South, during a time of revolt, that truly brought him home and clarified what he'd missed while he was away.

> In the years in Paris, I had never been homesick for anything American—neither waffles, ice cream, hot dogs, baseball . . . But I had missed my brothers and my sisters and my mother—they made a difference . . . I missed Harlem Sunday mornings and fried chicken and biscuits, I missed the music, I missed the style—that style possessed by no other people in this world. I missed the way the dark face closes, the way dark eyes watch, and the way, when a dark face opens, a light seems to go on everywhere . . . Now, though I was a stranger, I was home." (p. 289-90)

Part two of *No Name in the Street*, "To Be Baptized," opens with a radical essay on the paradoxes of historical and political power such as they appeared to Baldwin, looking back on the previous decades, especially during the freedom movement years (1957–1968). In "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), in the "void" where opposing facts and understandings collide and collapse, Baldwin found an opportunity to glimpse "unknown selves," crucial sources of truth and deep insight, signs of life that hadn't been prepared and scripted by the ruling forces and categories. In the late 1940s, Baldwin located this resonant tumult in a person's private and interior lives. Somewhat later, in *Another Country*, he found the creative turbulence in honest intimate life and in virtuosic artistic performances. In *No Name in the Street*, the havens having vanished, the collisions and collapses of the void were explicitly political. The torsions of historical change, if spasmodic and dangerous, weren't to be avoided, they were people's most valuable mirror.

> But for power to truly feel itself menaced, it must somehow sense itself in the presence of another power—or, more accurately, an energy—which it has not known how to define and therefore does not really know how to control. For a long time, for example, Americans prospered—or seemed to prosper: this prosperity cost millions of people their lives. Now, not even the people who are the most spectacular recipients of the benefits of this prosperity are able to endure these benefits: they can neither understand them nor do without them, nor can they go beyond them . . . in order to preserve these values, however stifling or joyless these values have caused their lives to be, the bulk of the people desperately seek out representatives who are prepared to make up in cruelty what both they and the people lack in conviction. (p. 303)

Differing in Baldwin's eyes from the confusion of mainstream American lives described above, was another void, "a very different intelligence" which had surfaced as the high ideals of the freedom movement began to collapse as its leaders were murdered (p. 329). This new intelligence (which was not new at all) became part of the country's self-conscious awareness as millions of Black people witnessed the emergence and demolition of historical hopes, ideals, flaws, and confusions. A reckoning was taking place in Black America. Baldwin encountered this emerging consciousness in Black students in city schools where he faced "an alertness, and eagerness, and a depth which I certainly did not find in—or failed to elicit from—students at many splendid universities" (p. 329).

> For it is a very different matter, and results in a very different intelligence, to grow up under the necessity of questioning everything—everything, from the question of one's identity to the literal, brutal question of how to save one's life in order to begin to live it. (p. 329)

Accounting for the differences he perceived as he navigated the uproarious space between the paradoxical perils of privilege and pressurized power of reckonings among the oppressed, he wrote:

> The reason for this, at bottom, is that the doctrine of white supremacy, which still controls most white people, is itself a stupendous delusion: but to be born black in America is an immediate, mortal challenge. People who cling to their delusions find it difficult, if not impossible, to learn anything worth learning: a people under the necessity of creating themselves must examine everything, and soak up learning the way the roots of a tree soak up water. (p. 330)

After sketching these historical voids and establishing, as it were, his radical point of view, Baldwin reviews more recent historical events as he'd encountered them across the preceding decade: Malcolm X's importance as Baldwin had come to know it through their meetings since the early 1960s and through his time working on the screenplay version of Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (February 1968–July 1969); a case of racial profiling and wrongful incarceration involving a personal friend and associate, Tony Maynard, who spent years in jail owing to questionable charges for murder;

his advocacy for Maynard, his attempts to force Hollywood to take Malcolm X seriously, and his continued support, via appearances and fundraisers, for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s rapidly changing vision, which culminated in plans for the Poor People's Campaign of 1968; how he learned of King's assassination and attending his funeral in Atlanta; how he came to know and support the Black Panther program and leadership, especially Huey Newton and including Eldridge Cleaver, who'd openly criticized him.

Echoing the final pages of his fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), Baldwin finishes *No Name in the Street* turning back and forth between the radical Black youth and the mostly white "flower children" in the streets of the Haight in San Francisco, who had confronted different voids and reacted to very different unknown selves recently churned up by emerging history. The United States had endured the movement, once again, and mostly failed—likely, Baldwin thought, for the last time—to accommodate Black people as full citizens. The call for change in *The Fire Next Time* was domestic. By the early 1970s, the scope was global.

> **And, of course, any real commitment to black freedom in this country would have the effect of reordering all our priorities, and altering all our commitments, so that, for horrendous example, we would be supporting black freedom fighters in South Africa and Angola, and would not be allied with Portugal, would be closer to Cuba than we are to Spain, would be supporting the Arab nations instead of Israel, and would never have felt compelled to follow the French into Southeast Asia. But such a course would forever wipe the smile from the face of that friend we all rejoice to have at Chase Manhattan . . . but to hint such things now is very close to treason.** (p. 362)

Concluding *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin looks out on throngs of discontented and bewildered young people in what to him resembles "one vast, howling, unprecedented, orphanage" (p. 367). He sees Black kids coming to terms with previously unknown selves in the image of "a tremendous spiritual condition, one of the greatest challenges anyone alive can face" (p. 370), and white kids, as if on the other side of the street, realizing that they "were privileged and secure only so long as they did, in effect, what they were told: but they had been raised to believe that they were free" (p. 366). The comingling of and conflicts between these groups, and the persons in them, Baldwin felt, "is obviously crucial, containing the shape of the American future and the only potential of a truly American identity" (p. 369). Returning to the void, now historicized, and radicalized, Baldwin wrote: "No one knows precisely how identities are forged, but it is safe to say that identities are not invented: an identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience" (p. 369). Only by such a process could people, and persons, "be released from the stigma of blackness" and "surmount the delusion of whiteness" (p. 370). In resisting the process, however frightening, "people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction" (p. 373). As if seeing all the alternatives before them swirling in the void, he ends the book: "black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come" (p. 373).

Examine how:

- In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin's voice seems at once more personal—containing dozens of references to persons and events that many in his audience (and certainly now) would have to look up—*and* more political—havens having disappeared—so that he links the personal directly to political events and activists;
- Baldwin laced *No Name in the Street* with references to persons and places, keeping a log of names, from films, *Mission to Moscow* and *The Wages of Fear*, and figures, such as Wilhelm Reich and Karen Horney to Dorothy Counts and Bobby Seale;
- The implications in Baldwin's focus on "relatively conscious" Black and white people at the end of *The Fire Next Time* changes and radicalizes, at the end of *No Name in the Street*, to Black radicals and white flower children in the streets of San Francisco.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW — BALDWIN'S FOCUS ON BLACK FAMILIES AND FUTURES: (1969–1979)

As the powers in Hollywood showed their cards, making it plain to Baldwin that getting his version of Malcolm X into a feature film in the early 1970s would be impossible, he contributed a brief essay, "The Price May Be Too High," to the Sunday *New York Times* (February 2, 1969) as part of an inquiry into the politics and possibilities of Black – white cooperation in the arts. Along with fellow contributors including Dick Gregory, Julian Mayfield, Barbara Ann Teer, Harry Belafonte, and Alice Childress, Baldwin held:

> **I will state flatly that the bulk of this country's white population impresses me, and has so impressed me for a very long time, as being beyond any conceivable hope of moral rehabilitation. They have been white, if I may so put it, too long; they have been married to the lie of white supremacy**

> too long; the effect on their personalities, their lives, their grasp of reality, has been as devastating as the lava which so memorably immobilized the citizens of Pompeii. They are unable to conceive that their version of reality, which they want me to accept, is an insult to my history and a parody of theirs and an intolerable violation of myself.

Baldwin had long aimed, and would continue to aim, to make it clear that when he said things like this he wasn't talking about a "racial" identity. He wasn't referring to "racial" lies about skin color or biology or genetics. He was talking about "color," and "shade," complex cultural and historical realities that were chronically mistaken for inborn "racial" characteristics. Here and there since the mid-1960s, Baldwin paused to remind anyone who'd pay attention that, as far as he was concerned, "Black" wasn't a *racial* designation either, not a true one, since there were (no matter how real power made its lies) no *true* racial designations. Blackness carried essential truths, for sure, historical, cultural, all encompassing. As he wrote for *Freedomways* in 1967, the last thing we needed, after all the centuries of resistance, was to transform Black into another racial lie in (failed) defiance of racism. Pointing out the irony, and along a line of thinking that goes back all the way to "Everybody's Protest Novel," he warned so-called radicals aiming to convert Black into an oppositional, racial identity that, after "carefully manipulating the color, Black," they would "merely . . . become white."

But mostly no one listened. Certainly, most people who were convinced they were white didn't listen. How could they? For years, Baldwin had exercised much effort to suggest how. But, by 1970, that was over. When he left the United States in 1969, the work that lay ahead, he felt, must focus on what had emerged in the sixties, as a buried history surged forth to be discussed and quarreled over, redeemed and betrayed, once more. *No Name in the Street* was all about that emergence.

Baldwin was no longer young. He was headed to age fifty, and it had been a strenuous fifty years to say the least. He considered it an uncountable miracle he'd survived at all. But, since he had, he thought he owed it to the younger generation to do what he could, which was to try to clarify what the previous decades, on behalf of centuries before, had made it possible to know, and to do.

He left Los Angeles and the Malcolm X film project in July 1969, flew back to Istanbul with his oldest mentor, Beauford Delaney, and his latest lover, a young North African man named Alain, and set up house. He needed to rest, to heal, and to figure out how to go about what he sensed lay ahead, which would be unlike what he had done before. He stayed in Istanbul for most of the next year, moved back to France and, when ill in December 1970, was sent to a small town known to his friends, St. Paul de Vence, located up the mountain from Nice. By degrees, Baldwin settled in St. Paul de Vence, staying in a hotel, then in a rented room, which became a rented house, which he then endeavored to purchase.

Quarrels and quandaries over money were nothing new to Baldwin, who made a lot of money and spent even more, mostly on others. But as the Black Power–era pierced layers of normalized paternalism, Baldwin had become dissatisfied with his publishing contracts. He thought his work was worth *much* more than Dial Press told him. When he decided to buy the house he was renting, this trouble came to a head and Baldwin went rogue in an all-out war with his publisher (and whoever else stood in his way) over money. In time he proved that he was right, Dial Press amended his contract, he bought the house (not necessarily in that order), and he made his way.

But the pressure and quasi-legal battle over money imprinted his next work, along with the need to engage a younger generation of Black artists and readers about their mutual and collective inheritance.

Anyone who still thought they were "white" after the 1960s, Baldwin thought, was irrelevant. Those who figured out the score would have to make *their* way. In May 1972, visiting Los Angeles, Baldwin summed up those stakes concisely in a speech to The Committee of the Arts to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners: If some random so-called white man wants to make it he'll have to "liberate himself from being white . . . become a brother . . . or he'll probably be doomed."

CENTENNIAL EDITION — *IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK* (1974)

Baldwin's fifth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, was his first attempt to create a novel based wholly on what he'd learned after he returned to the United States in 1957 and engaged the freedom movement. He'd clarified these lessons in *No Name in the Street* (1972). By the 1970s, Baldwin thought Black survival, and whatever real success amounted to, was in Black people's hands. It was, in effect, a family matter. It was a very large, diffuse family and a very serious matter.

Baldwin thought the central peril of American life, history, and culture had to do with how it made people feel irrelevant to each other. From the pyramids of competitive economic and bureaucratic structures to the mythic "individual" itself, complex pressures estranged people from one another, and so from themselves. Most problems misunderstood as racial were really about this insidious and disastrous estrangement. While race was a lie, color and culture were key factors.

The Rivers family in *If Beale Street Could Talk* stands for Baldwin's first attempt to explore the lives of people, Black, who'd maintained their relevance—call it love—to each other. It's a slim book. Along with *Giovanni's Room*, it's Baldwin's shortest novel. It was written to explore a few key lessons, and also as a part of Baldwin's war over money with the publishers. An urgency and focus—however the reasons differed—*Beale Street* shares with *Giovanni's Room*.

Setting the catastrophes in white America aside, the pressures of American estrangement were perilous in the lives of poor Black and brown (and, in *Beale Street*, Puerto Rican) families, but Baldwin knew two things: this struggle was nothing new to Black folks, it was in a way an indigenous condition; and the previous fifteen years had exposed the perils and demonstrated, however inadequately, alternatives as well as the life-saving stakes of maintaining connections. The Rivers family, in part modeled on the family of Baldwin's good friend, David Moses, lives in a subtle and powerful rhythm of connection with each other.

Early in the novel, the family sits in the living room as darkness falls, sounds from the Harlem street rise up, and Ray Charles plays on the record player. Ray's sound echoes "the beat" of connection from *Another Country* and "the sound" of connection beyond categories that John Grimes descends into (and guided by) at the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. It's the sound of Sonny's final solo in "Sonny's Blues" and it's a sound that David from *Giovanni's Room* will have to learn something about "or he'll probably be doomed." In the voice of Clementine "Tish" Rivers, Baldwin's young narrator, he writes:

> I listened to the music and the sounds from the streets and Daddy's hand rested lightly on my hair. And everything seemed connected—he street sounds, and Ray's voice and his piano and the lights coming from the kitchen. It was as though we were a picture, trapped in time: this had been happening for hundreds of years, people sitting in a room, waiting for dinner, and listening to the blues. And it was as though, out of these elements, this patience, my Daddy's touch, the sounds of my mother in the kitchen, the way the light fell, the way the music continued beneath everything, the movement of Ernestine's head as she lit a cigarette, the movement of her hand as she dropped the match into the ashtray, the blurred human voices rising from the street, out of this rage and a steady, somehow triumphant sorrow, my baby was slowly being formed. (p. 41)

The Rivers family has maintained their connections to their street, and streets far beyond Harlem, and with each other, through gestures obvious and subtle—subtleties such as the absence of bourgeois disdain, and consequent lust, for sexuality. In *Beale Street*, fathers and lovers, for instance, aren't strangers. Tish relates: "My father rubbed his hand over my forehead. I thought of Fonny's touch. . .." In the opening scene, as Sharon Rivers gets ready to share the news that Tish and Fonny, who is in jail, will be parents, Tish remarks on the fundamental, even universal, bond among the family, which includes Fonny, and the unborn: "No one looked at me. I was there, then, for them, in a way, that had nothing to do with me. I was there, then, for them, like Fonny was present, like my baby, just beginning now, out of a long, long sleep, to turn, to listen, to awaken, somewhere beneath my heart." Real human connections involve far more than the narrow identities we can identify. That's why it's the unknown selves that can save.

In a moving and resonant version of what's been learned, Baldwin positions Tish and Fonny in a position similar to Elizabeth and Richard in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: Elizabeth pregnant, Richard in jail. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, according to the individualized logic of the liberal literary culture into which Baldwin translated himself and his work, Elizabeth, lovingly (she thinks) decides not to tell Richard about the pregnancy, the baby. She doesn't want to burden him with another responsibility, and so those unknown selves (the child, the father) remain unknown. After Richard's suicide we wonder if those unknown selves could have saved Richard, who Baldwin cast in the fictionalized role of his unknown biological father.

In *Beale Street*, Tish, who could be Elizabeth Grimes's granddaughter, makes it a point of telling Fonny that he'll be a father, and we see the strength it builds within and between them. Sharon Rivers already knows. She tells Tish "don't you worry . . . that baby be the best thing that ever happened to Fonny. He needs that baby" (p. 33). As if the baby's already part of Ray Charles's song and the street sounds outside, Joseph Rivers welcomes the new life, when he learns the news, saying in a toast, "That's a hell of a note" (p. 44).

Roe v. Wade had been passed into law on January 22, 1973, while Baldwin was still writing Beale Street, which he finished after working till dawn on Sunday, October 12, 1973. So Rivers checks with his daughter one time: "You sure you want this baby, Tish?" (p. 46). After she says yes, everyone makes it clear that this is their baby. The Rivers are Baldwin's revolutionized ideal of a family that doesn't produce orphans.

If Black people are the hope in *Beale Street*, then Black people can also present the most dangerous peril as well. Baldwin created the Hunt family to act out a counterrevolutionary force, a force with a long history of its own. Frank Hunt, Fonny's somewhat hapless father, signals a precarious image of Black masculinity. A father of three, a tailor whose middle-class standing has eroded over the decades, Frank Hunt attempts to hold his own and follow through for his son. He's helpless,

however, in the face of the will to—white—estrangement alive in his wife, Alice, and daughters Adrienne and Shiela.

The villains in *Beale Street* include the corrupt police who target and imprison Fonny, and the system that cooperates with them to single out and destroy Black men and women and children. Baldwin experienced this system all of his life and then close up in detail during the case of Tony Maynard, as well as the political imprisonment of Huey Newton, Angela Davis, the Soledad Brothers, and many others in the late sixties and early seventies. But Alice Hunt and her daughters present a formidable menace. And while the racist police, complicit lawyers and eager bankers exist at a fiery periphery, the violence of the Hunt women is intimate, is *also* family and, therefore, Baldwin holds nothing back in targeting the lethal danger they pose. In fact, his aim is purposefully gratuitous.

Baldwin brings the Rivers and Hunt families together to share the news that Tish is pregnant with Fonny's baby, news the Rivers celebrate while acknowledging the solemn and serious responsibility all will bear. Frank Hunt does his best to absorb the challenge and acknowledge the gift, which Baldwin takes great care to position in the lives of the Black men of the family. Alice Hunt regards the news of her grandchild as a holy scar and scandal, and Fonny's sisters feel as if, to the extent it's any of their business, the child will threaten their ambitions for social mobility. Mrs. Hunt goes as far as cursing the new life itself, telling Tish: "I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son . . . The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb. But my son will be forgiven. *My* prayers will save him" (p. 68).

The duty to mobilize everything around the sacred importance of human lives to the extent it is humanly possible is the core of the revolutionary worldview Baldwin proposes in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. This, he thought, was the deepest lesson to arrive in the emergence of Black history during the previous decade. The role of defending this revolutionary principle falls to Tish's sister, Ernestine, whose voice Baldwin loads up with vitriol, making it hard to read, which is the whole point. The graphic terms of Ernestine's confrontation with Alice Hunt and her daughters defend the new life arriving in the novel, but they also defend the deepest principle Baldwin could identify with the revolution that was unraveling into chaos as he wrote the book, a principle he hoped to save and pass along.

> "You just cursed the child in my sister's womb. Don't you never let me see you again, you broken down half-white bride of Christ." And she spat in Mrs. Hunt's face, and then let the elevator door close. And she yelled down the shaft, "That's your flesh and blood you were cursing, you sick, filthy dried-up cunt! And you carry that message to the Holy Ghost and if He don't like it you tell Him I said He's a faggot and He better not come nowhere near me." (p. 73)

Readers are sure to find offense in these sentences of *If Beale Street Could Talk*. But I quote them here to emphasize the level of criminality, the depth of the offense Baldwin assigned to the willful turning away from human needs, especially the needs of children. This crime was pervasive, in general, and constituted a calculated assault on Black communities that Baldwin considered genocidal. Baldwin loaded up Ernestine's counterassault so that the offense would last across generations who might pick up the novel long after he was gone.

With Frank Hunt teetering, and with the Hunt women anathema, Tish and the Rivers family knew: "We were his family now, the only family he had: and now everything was up to us" (p. 74). Baldwin thus inaugurates his revolutionized worldview in *If Beale Street Could Talk*: when it came to Black survival in the United States, and likely to the survival of the country as a whole, Baldwin was convinced that "everything was up to us," "us" being Black folks who'd realized they weren't irrelevant to each other, along with anyone else who could liberate themselves from being white—which Baldwin thought meant estranged, separate, no matter what color—and take on the responsibility of family. This responsibility began close to home and radiated outward in defiance of all borders and divisions. Later on, Joseph and Frank discuss extralegal plans to fund Fonny's defense. The conversation covers the specific crisis at hand, as well as the future in general, according to Baldwin.

> "What you think is going to happen?"
>
> "What we *make* happen," says Joseph—again, with resolution.
>
> "That's easy to say," says Frank.
>
> "Not if you mean it," says Joseph. (p. 125)

Along the periphery of the Rivers family, Baldwin aligns minor characters who aren't Black but who support (or try). All of these characters are distinctly ethnic and haven't yet been metabolized into estrangement—white—by American history: the proprietors of the Spanish restaurant who take care of Tish after Fonny's locked up; the Italian grocery store owner who stands up to the police and tells Tish: "Take him home. Away from these diseased pigs . . . I have been in America a long time . . . I hope not to die here" (p. 139); and the owner of the loft building, who agrees to rent to Fonny and Tish, "Levy . . . an olive skinned, curly-haired, merry-faced boy from the Bronx, maybe about thirty-three" who "dug people who loved each other" (p. 133).

The plight and decision of Victoria Sanchez, a young Puerto Rican woman accusing (or being used to accuse) Fonny of rape, poses Baldwin's question about the terms, limits, and extent of solidarity between

communities. Sharon Rivers travels to Puerto Rico, where Baldwin had spent much of the summer of 1963, to testify on Fonny's behalf, and on her daughter's, and to persuade Ms. Sanchez against being used to imprison him. In effect, Baldwin asks if Sanchez will side with the revolutionary family responsibility. Sharon reminds Victoria that Fonny is Black "like us" (p. 169). Or, Baldwin asks, will Sanchez side, as have other American ethnicities, and persons, with the power—white—of estrangement and ask to be left alone. Having absorbed the meaning of Black history, recently reemerged via the freedom movement years, like her author, Sharon Rivers knows " we are not alone" (p. 162). The key is to seek and honor connections rather than avoid responsibility.

The question of Fonny's innocence in *If Beale Street Could Talk* benefits from detailed attention. Sanchez *has* been raped. Mrs. Rivers says she knows Fonny didn't do it because she has "known him all his life." Sanchez's response goes unanswered in the novel.

> **"Hah!" says Victoria, and tries to move away . . . "If you knew how many women I've heard say that. They didn't see him—when I saw him—when he came to *me*! They *never* see that. Respectable women—like you!—they never see that . . . You might have known a nice little boy, and he might be a nice man—with *you*! But you don't know the man who did—who did—what he did to me!"** (pp. 169-170)

We don't imagine that Fonny raped Victoria Sanchez. But Baldwin's point isn't that Fonny is innocent. A powerful image of "particular reason," Fonny is powerfully, intensely himself and represents a kind of danger and ambiguity, even volatility, that Baldwin understood as crucial to masculine power, certainly Black masculine power. Fonny is clearly not guilty of the crime against Ms. Sanchez, but considering him innocent mobilizes a paralyzing history leading back to Baldwin's critique of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in "Everybody's Protest Novel."

Baldwin also went out of his way to name the character Alonzo Hunt, saying "it might make sense if people called him Lonnie" (p. 3). In letters describing the novel, Baldwin spelled Fonny's name "Fonnie," spelling it so that it matched, but for one letter, a very close friend of Baldwin's, a Black artist named Alonzo "Lonnie" Levister, who *had* raped one of their friends, a little known but very real historical detail that lurks between the lines of *Beale Street* in ways that work against romanticizing and idealizing Fonny, and reinforcing mythologies of "innocence," which Baldwin refused to do.

The dangers of revolutionary family responsibility are *real*. The necessity, as far as Baldwin was concerned, was absolute. Victoria Sanchez's final speech to Sharon Rivers underscores that point. But the connections are real, too. They contend with the differences, which are real and manufactured. Meantime, in all of this, Baldwin urges readers to keep in mind that the "miscalculations of this world are vast" (p. 184). Upon her return from Puerto Rico, Sharon Rivers tells Ernestine, "I don't speak no Spanish and they don't speak no English. But we on the same garbage heap. For the same reason" (p. 185).

Meanwhile, in ways that resonate even more in the twenty-first century age of mass incarceration than it did in the 1970s, Fonny and millions of men remain in prison: "These captive men are the hidden price for a hidden lie: the righteous must be able to locate the damned" (p. 192)

CENTENNIAL EDITION — *THE DEVIL FINDS WORK* (1976)

James Baldwin never wrote an autobiography. But his experiences lace all of his work, bent and twisted around the exigencies of each era. So pieces of what might have been an autobiography appear here and there, in small slices and thick tranches, and often enough in repeated, differing, and even contradicting recollections of situations and events.

Along with the pieces of autobiographical reflection strewn through his essays, speeches, and novels, three of his book-length works of nonfiction, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) function as a triptych memoir or autobiography. *The Fire Next Time* narrates Baldwin's exit from the Cold War neutrality of the first phase of his literary career and his entry into a role as a public witness to American life; *No Name in the Street* reviews his life, especially around his return from France after *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was accepted in 1952, and focuses in retrospect on the increasingly radical freedom movement, Baldwin's own radicalization at the center; and, in *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin recounts moments and eras of his life through his love of film, his early experiences going to movies, and, in contrast, plays, and, later, his illuminating critiques of the lure and danger of Hollywood fantasies that depict the historical and contemporary world through motivated commercial distortions.

The Devil Finds Work records some of Baldwin's finest writing, from his earliest memories of Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, and Sylvia Sidney in the movies of his childhood and youth, and of Orilla "Bill" Miller, an activist educator who took Baldwin under her wing from his later years in elementary school and into junior high school, exposing him to films, plays, art, and revolutionary ideals. About her name, Baldwin explained: "her name was Orilla, we called her Bill." About

his childhood in the 1930s, with an ironic fondness, he confides: "In a way, we were all niggers in the thirties . . . it was harder then, and riskier, to attempt a separate peace, and benign neglect was not among our possibilities" (p. 401). Identifying, as had John Grimes early in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, with the rebel—and often doomed—Hollywood heroines far more than the stereotyped, pseudo-Black characters of 1930s cinema, Baldwin ushers readers into his "first entrance into the cinema of my mind."

Describing the most important and dangerous feature of cinema, Baldwin notes that the "distance between oneself—the audience—and a screen performer is an absolute: a paradoxical absolute, masquerading as intimacy" (p. 404). This power is exactly the importance of movies as well as the danger they present as a part of the history and economy of the United States. Movies create a powerful illusion of presence and proximity, which "indicates one of the irreducible dangers to which the moviegoer is exposed: the danger of surrendering to the corroboration of one's fantasies as they are thrown back from the screen" (p. 405). This is, Baldwin advises, a feature of film that contrasts sharply with the theater, where "one is not in the presence of shadows, but is responding to one's flesh and blood: in the theater, we are recreating each other" (p. 405). This is particularly important and dangerous in the United States where it's denied to the point it becomes inconceivable that, as Baldwin held, "we are *all* each other's flesh and blood" (p. 406).

By the 1970s, when the romance with revolutionary change had ended in disillusion and chaos, but before the conservative backlash of the 1980s had taken hold, *The Devil Finds Work* records Baldwin's attempt to saddle popular culture, and cultural critique, with the power to generate unknown selves of renewal. If it wasn't going to happen in the streets, maybe it could be on screen and on stage (or at least in what we can make of what happens there) where the ruling categories could be clarified and overthrown.

As he'd done in *No Name in the Street*, recalling the March on Washington, the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist in Birmingham, the assassinations, and the rise of Black Power, the middle section of *Devil* masterfully takes apart films such as *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), focusing on the tragic limitations and subtle brilliance of Sidney Poitier's performances. In capable hands, Baldwin suggests, Hollywood's deft presentation of American fantasies can be powerfully instructive and revealing. In order to benefit, however, we must first accept and then rescue ourselves, and each other, from our fantasies.

Midway through the middle chapter of *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin refigures identity, as he had through the decades, in shifting and complex terms. Wedged between Baldwin's caustic criticisms of Hollywood's liberal racism and a stunning analysis of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), in which his close friend Anthony Quinn played Arab leader Auda Abu Tayeh, Baldwin wrote:

> The question of identity is a question involving the most profound panic—a terror as primary as the nightmare of the mortal fall . . . An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself. Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes. (p. 446)

Beginning the final section of *Devil* by returning to his travails and failures with the film version of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Baldwin dwells on *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), starring Diana Ross and Billy Dee Williams, in attempts to save what he can from the film version of Billie Holiday's autobiography. Baldwin tactfully avoids saying that *Lady* does exactly to Billie Holiday what he refused to do to Malcolm, but that's pretty close to the truth. Instead, he decodes the fantasies to revealing effect, concluding that Billie Holiday—who sits at the pinnacle of what Baldwin thought being an artist was all about—"was much stronger than this film can have any interest in indicating, and, as a victim, infinitely more complex" (p. 475).

Baldwin skips altogether the era of Blaxploitation films, which, by 1976, was concluding, writing that he was "deliberately avoiding the recent spate of so-called black films . . . at least in part, financed by blacks," which he thought—while not specifying whose fantasies were whose—had been made "to make the black experience irrelevant and obsolete" (p. 468).

Baldwin concludes *The Devil Finds Work* with one of the great dismounts of his career. Leaping from detailing the vaudevillian absurdity of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), Baldwin lands in one of his most haunting and revealing paragraphs. Focused upon the myriad dangers of people's estrangement from each other, which, according to Baldwin, inflicts upon them a brutal estrangement from themselves.

> To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does too: and, if I can respect this, both of us can live. Neither of us, truly, can live without the other: a statement which would not sound so

> banal if one were not endlessly compelled to repeat it, and, further, believe it, and act on that belief. . . .
>
> For I have seen the devil, by day and by night, and have seen him in you and in me: in the eyes of the cop and the sheriff and the deputy, the landlord, the housewife, the football player: in the eyes of some junkies, the eyes of some preachers, the eyes of some governors, presidents, wardens, in the eyes of some orphans, and in the eyes of my father, and in my mirror. It is that moment when no other human being is real for you, nor are you real for yourself. This devil has no need of any dogma—though he can use them all—nor does he need any historical justification, history being so largely his invention. (pp. 484-485)

MAJOR TEXT — *JUST ABOVE MY HEAD* (1979)

Along with its comparative brevity and concision, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is like *Giovanni's Room* in that it isolated a complex of questions in preface to a larger novel which brought the issues back into connection with *all* the questions Baldwin could summon. In *Giovanni's Room*, the question of sexuality, queer sexuality, and the unknown selves that lurk in the body, and only *between* bodies, operates at a distance from questions of color and culture and history, certainly as relates Black people in the United States. Those questions come back furiously in *Another Country*. *Beale Street* poses questions of color and culture but mostly leaves aside the matter of queer sexuality. Baldwin would bring all of that back together in his final novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979), his longest work and his greatest achievement.

Just Above My Head has also been one of Baldwin's least read and most disrespected works. But this novel explores how people's sustained relevance to each other involves historical reckonings and how that relevance puts persons in touch with unknown selves that live *among*—as opposed to just between—them. Therefore, *Just Above My Head* meditates at length and depth upon Baldwin's suspicion that remaining in touch with intimate life requires social and historical reach, and that coherent social and historical perspectives depend upon authority that is rooted in private life.

There's one essential bridge between *Beale Street* and how Baldwin's incomparable explorations in *Just Above My Head* further a line of thought across his career in fiction. Departing from the individualized accounts in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, experience is figured as relational in his novels beginning with *Giovanni's Room*. This was Baldwin's way of getting out of the individualistic dead end he'd been trapped in by his work in the 1950s. In novels from the 1960s, Baldwin explored discoveries of "unknown selves" happening *between*, as well as within, his characters. By the 1970s, and in meditating on the journey through the sixties in *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin had learned something more about relational selves: it wasn't just an empirical necessity of lovers, and the best performers, it was also a feature among families and friends who'd avoided becoming irrelevant to each other. In his later novels, characters sensed each other in complex combinations. In *Beale Street*, and even more in *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin stressed that characters' sense of each other had more to do with love than perception and functioned *among* social groups as well as *between* intimate pairs.

Humans had a sixth sense, targeted and maligned: a sense of each other. Black people in the United States were, in fact, indigenous to that sense. We see the germs of this dynamic between the members of the Rivers family (as we will also see it in *Just Above My Head* among the Montana family). Maybe for the first time, Baldwin makes all of this explicit when Fonny brings Daniel, an old acquaintance who is just out of prison, to the apartment. Tish reports:

> I recognize Daniel by the light in Fonny's eyes . . . I can see to what extent he has been beaten. This is not because I am perceptive, but because I am in love with Fonny. Neither love nor terror makes one blind: indifference makes one blind. And I could not be indifferent to Daniel because I realized, from Fonny's face, how marvelous it was for him to have scooped up, miraculously, from the swamp waters of his past, a friend. (p. 99)

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW — JAMES BALDWIN AS VISIONARY MORAL ELDER (1980–1987)

In April 1975, Baldwin told his brother that he'd completed the first and second chapters of *The Devil Finds Work* and that the third and last chapter, "Where the Grapes of Wrath Are Stored," was being written for him "in headlines all over the world." The American war in Vietnam was, finally, coming to an end, in defeat for the United States. Though most had no idea it would happen until it happened, the country was about to elect its last arguably well-meaning president, Jimmy Carter. Days after Carter's inauguration, Baldwin wrote an open letter to him in *The New York Times* imploring that he do his best and adding that Carter was "in my lifetime . . . the only president to whom I would have written."

Four years later, in October 1980, as the country was poised to elect Ronald Reagan by a historic landslide in what Baldwin and many others, including Reagan, considered an open repudiation of any real effort to reckon with the most important legacies of American and Western history, Baldwin published an essay in *Esquire* titled "Dark Days." A new decade, Baldwin's last, was dawning, a decade that Baldwin's concluding parable in *The Devil Finds Work* illuminates as well as anything else.

Watching the conservative resurgence taking shape in the United States around Ronald Reagan, Baldwin, no longer a central figure in a literary landscape being redefined by Black women, many of them his friends, turned his gaze closer to home. With his life assuming newly loose and fluid connections, he assumed a position as visionary elder. In July 1980, he wrote his brother David a searching letter sifting through friendships since his early days in Paris. In that letter, he leaps to a reconsideration of the price and perils of mutuality.

> Hell is <u>not</u> other people. Hell is a place discovered, built, and furnished, by oneself. And I will let that statement stand—perhaps as a challenge to us all, forever—in spite of the fact that I know that it is probable that only a black Westerner, at this point in the world's history, would be likely to make such a statement, and in spite of the fact that I know that, in Harlem, Soweto, Teheran, to cite but three examples, Hell is other people. But—<u>by any means necessary</u>—the price for conquering the other is the conquest of oneself. The price for that conquest is the recognition that one carries the other within oneself: the evil that lives in the world, and in the human heart, is no respecter of persons. Think of revolutions, the mighty leveled, the low raised high. Ah. But we are arriving at the end of this merciless geometry.

Baldwin's notes to his brother resound with the core message of his work during the last decade of his life, a set of improvisations on a theme from a crucial passage in *Just Above My Head* in which the gospel singer Arthur Montana "puts the two words together *black American* and hears, at once, the . . . truth of history—which is nothing more and nothing less than the beating of his own heart, his song." Extending Arthur's epiphany, Baldwin writes, "Our history is each other. That is our only guide. One thing is absolutely certain: one can repudiate, or despise, no one's history without repudiating and despising one's own. Perhaps that's what the gospel singer is singing."

During the 1980s, it had become painfully obvious that the individualism of the Cold War propaganda machine had been revived in Ronald Reagan's nostalgic appeal to a world of fortified, privatized suburbs. Brooding over the loss of the liberatory visions that had fueled the freedom movement, Baldwin reaffirmed his vision of a mutuality entailing contests and communions, in the world and close to home: "I have gone far afield," he wrote David, introducing an instructive distinction between love and devotion.

> Envy is very close to hatred, can disguise itself as love—that is, as devotion: but devotion is not love. Devotion is a conspiracy of mutual self-pitys [sic]—and I am better than that. Love, even at its harshest, gives strength and clarity, an ability to pick up one's bed and walk: devotion makes one helpless.

While his work after the monumental *Just Above My Head* didn't produce a book comparable to the best from the previous decades, Baldwin's most important published work of the 1980s explores the prospects for American and global human mutuality, often based on his observation of our most terrible crimes against each other. In an essay for *Playboy*, "Atlanta: The Evidence of Things Not Seen" (1981), he returns to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s city a decade after the death of the prophet to find that a project in Black prosperity had replaced the economic and moral substance of King's vision. Baldwin argues that, by creating a Black version of the American dream of commercial prosperity—a project he coded as "white"—Atlanta's Black adults had abandoned their children to an utter worldless-ness if not will-lessness, a vision of the world as a shopping mall. Summing up the deadly bargain, he wrote:

> Except for a ruthless animal cunning (which is capable of getting a child into as much trouble as it is incapable of getting him out of), children have no defenses. A child believes everything; he has no choice. That is how he sorts out reality. When a child retreats and can no longer be reached, it is not that he has ceased to believe; it is that we, who are all he has, have failed him and now he has no choice but to die. It may take many forms, and years; but the child has chosen to run to death.

The terrifying outcome, Baldwin writes, is the exchange of a hard-won mutuality at the heart of King's movement, a mutuality across class and color, for the "American polarity," where "one is looked up to or down upon; there is nothing in between."

In a December 1983 conversation with the revolutionary lesbian poet Audre Lorde, one of the most important of the newly visible generation of Black women writers led Baldwin's friend Toni Morrison, Baldwin reiterates the perils facing young Black people, to which Lorde responds: "When I say that we need to speak words to our children that no one else will say to them, I guess I'm talking about something very grounded in war." Baldwin, nodding along, asks if he understood her last word. Lorde responds, "In war! WAR! WAR!" And Baldwin urged her to continue. Lorde continues, ". . . to get across to my son growing up in a household with powerful women

that the women don't exist to do his feeling for him . . . To be able to say to kids, that shit you're seeing on TV is shit." In interviews and essays from the last decade of his life, including a seething and revealing exploration of color and sexuality titled "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" (1985), Baldwin continued to develop his vision of Black mutuality. "Black," as Baldwin stressed again and again, was not a "race," it was a color. Race was a divisive lie. As he'd explored in a scene between Arthur Montana and Guy Lazar late in *Just Above My Head*, "Black," historically created and culturally coded, was now a race, it was a complex and at least potentially inclusive spectrum of shades.

Closing an unbroken circle in Baldwin's career defined by tangents and vectors, his essays from the eighties, like those of the fifties and sixties, draw on events from early in his life and peer through into present manifestations of cultural and political—and often sexual—divisions and repressions that he thought prevented Americans from becoming what they already were. Americans had become unknown to themselves. People's inability—or refusal—to be what they already were resulted in chronic anxieties and endless spasmodic violence. In "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," he observes: "the idea of one's sexuality can only with great violence be divorced or distanced from the idea of the self. Yet something resembling this rupture has certainly occurred (and is occurring) in American life." In Baldwin's mature view, Americans must then replay this rupture in the culture, within themselves, and between each other using whatever symbols and details they can. Baldwin wrote, "violence has been the American daily bread since we've heard of America. This violence, furthermore, is not merely literal and actual but appears to be lusted after, and the key to the American imagination."

In "To Crush the Serpent" (1987), published in *Playboy*, Baldwin argues that people so violently separated from themselves forfeit the basic materials of mutuality. In compulsive retreat from their experience and "fueled by terror and self-hatred," they gather in mobs, large and small, fixated on some condemned enemy. Understanding himself to be "speaking as the historical victim of the flames meant to exorcize the terrors of the mob," Baldwin observes that these "ladders to fire—the burning of the witch, the heretic, the Jew, the nigger, the faggot—have always failed to redeem, or even change in any way whatever, the mob." Because "the charred bones are the sum total of their individual self-hatred, externalized," the public sphere becomes, catastrophically, a wasteland, "the only plain on which the mob can meet." And, for the same reason, he concludes, reinforcing their isolation, members of such mobs "dare not trust one another."

This was the self-repeating trap inside the trap. As he'd written to David about the conflicts at home in St. Paul de Vence, indeed, "Hell is not other people." Instead, as he wrote in *The Devil Finds Work*, Hell is the *otherness* of people; it "is that moment when no other human being is real for you, nor are you real for yourself." Baldwin knew one fake reality enlists the other, which is why he told David that Hell "is a place discovered, built, and furnished by oneself." Members of the mob that had assumed control of political life during the Reagan era can't trust each other, because one "of them might be next" on the scaffold. Without trust they have *only* themselves, which Baldwin knew was the negation of the self and the consequent, and devastating, forfeiture of the mutual. In the last paragraphs of "To Crush the Serpent," the final essay published during his life, Baldwin addressed how a racial and sexual futility fueled the American addiction to condemnation and "accounts for the violence of our TV screen and cinema, a violence far more dangerous than pornography. What we are watching is a compulsive reliving of the American crimes; what we are watching with the Falwells and Robertsons is an attempt to exorcise ourselves. This demands, indeed, a simple-mindedness quite beyond the possibilities of the human being. Complexity is our only safety and love is the only key to our maturity. And love is where you find it."

After a private ceremony the previous day, at noon on a misty Tuesday in Manhattan, December 8, 1987, which was his brother David's 56th birthday, Baldwin's friends and family joined hundreds of others at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City to mourn Baldwin's death. After a prolonged illness during that year, Baldwin had died in his bed in St. Paul de Vence a week earlier. He was 63 years old. So a community gathered to say thank you, knowing, as the Black music that accompanied Baldwin on every step of his journey testified, that every goodbye ain't gone. Baldwin had been right when he told David, "my life is certainly not to be measured in time." Among the many mourners were fellow writers, including Amiri Baraka, Baldwin's sometimes antagonist and reconciled comrade; Toni Morrison, who Baldwin had met in the early seventies when she was working at Random House, and who had been a coconspirator during his war with the publishers; and Maya Angelou, who Baldwin had known and supported over the decades. Baraka, Angelou, and Morrison, each in a different way, spoke of Baldwin's almost sacred importance. Morrison gave thanks for Baldwin's gifts of language, courage, and tenderness. His most crucial gift, she said with unmistakable love and her signature precision, was the way his life and work transformed "the distances between people into intimacy with the whole world." Baldwin's nephew, Helen and Lover's son Trevor, a singer like his father, and his uncle, led the choir in song. The Babatunde Olatunji Ensemble beat the drums echoing Morrison's words, "This then is no calamity. No. This is jubilee."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Ed Pavlić is author of thirteen books written across and between genres. His most recent works include: *Call It in the Air* (Milkweed Editions, 2022), *Outward: Adrienne Rich's Expanding Solitudes* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), *Let It Be Broke* (Four Way Books, 2020), and *Another Kind of Madness* (Milkweed Editions, 2019). His study of James Baldwin's relationship to Black music is titled *Who Can Afford to Improvise?: James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listener* (Fordham University Press, 2016). He is distinguished research professor of English, African American studies, and creative writing at the University of Georgia.

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